落第騎士の英雄譚（キャバルリィ）

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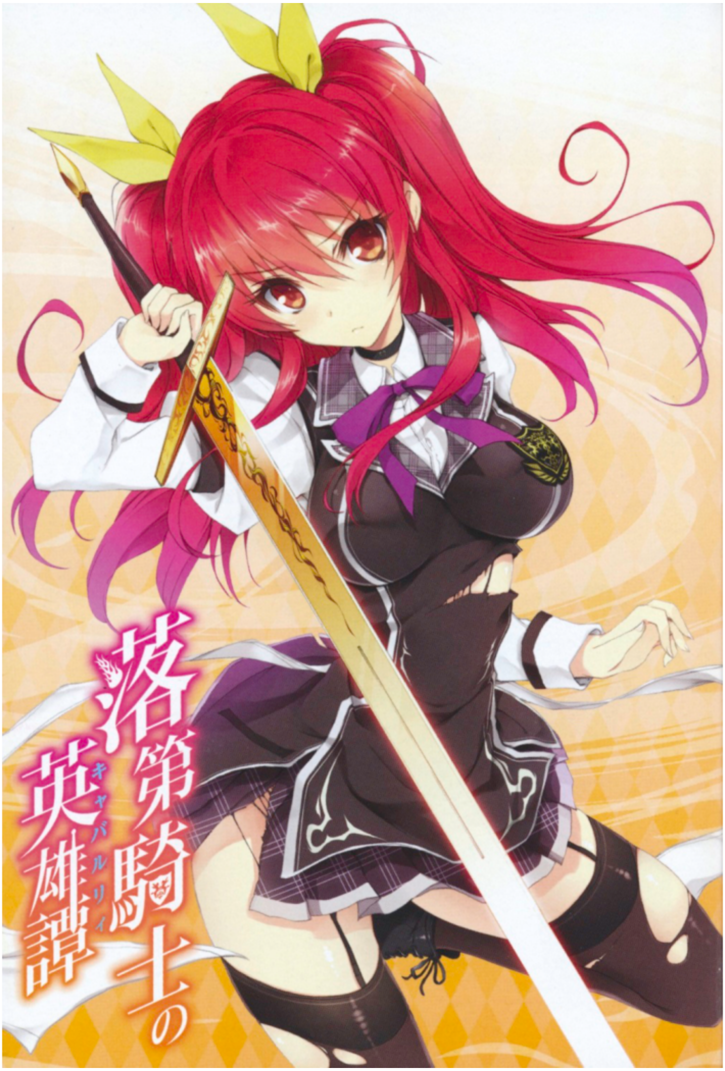
Novel Illustrations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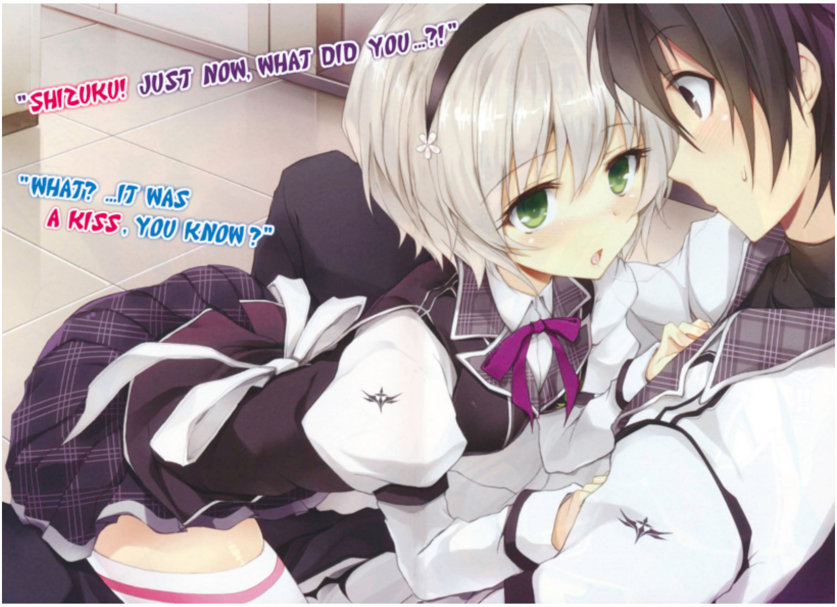


"SHIZUKU! JUST NOW, WHAT DID YOU...?!"
"WHAT? ...IT WAS A KISS, YOU KNOW?"

"ANYHOW! THIS IS MY DUTY AS YOUR SLAVE! SO HURRY UP AND SIT!"

CONTENTS

Prologue
A Morning Encounter 3

Chapter 1
Prodigy Knight and Failed Knight 8

Chapter 2
Visitor from that Former Home 84

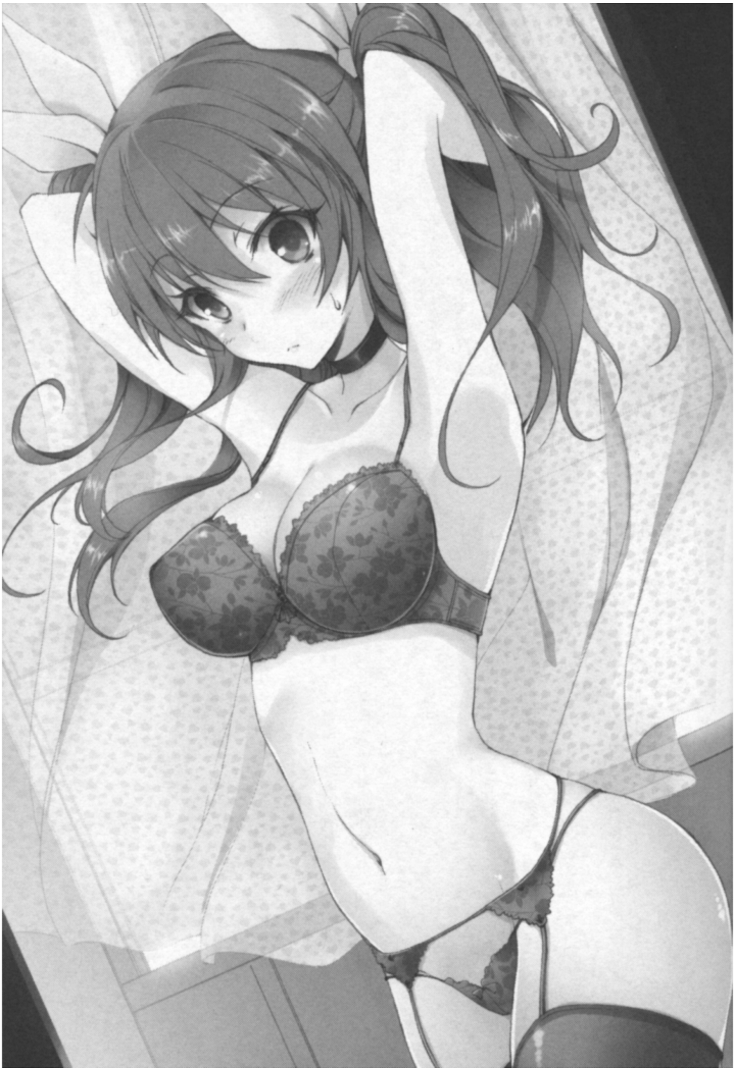
Chapter 3
Rebellion 143

Chapter 4
Debut Battle 221

Epilogue
A Moonlit Vow 301

Prologue: A Morning Encounter

After finishing his daily run, Ikki Kurogane returned to his student dormitory room and found a beautiful half-naked girl inside.



…*Eh?*

Crimson hair that seemed to embody waves of blazing fire.
Ruby pupils on a beautiful foreign face, opened wide in shock at the sudden intruder.
Unblemished limbs as white as fresh snow, clad in black lace.

Beautiful. Ikki couldn't think of another word to describe those features. Her beauty was like a painting of a goddess, evoking a solemnity that left no room for wicked lust. She simply captured the eye.

But… but why was such a girl in his room!?

Maybe I came in the wrong one?

He thought so, but it was room #405 of the first student dormitory. The two-and-a-half by three-and-a-half-meters-wide dwelling with a bunk bed was undoubtedly Ikki's, so the person making the mistake was most likely this girl, but—

"Eeeee—"

She leaked a small shriek from her cramped throat, and then he heard a deep breath being drawn.

Uh oh. If a girl screamed in this situation, accusations would surely fall on the guy.

"Please wait a minute! I understand what you want to say. It may have been an accident but I won't make excuses for what I clearly saw."

Ikki didn't try to blame anyone for this disaster. He could imagine the bitterness of being seen naked by a stranger. This was a situation that as a man, he ought to fix! So he said—

"That's why I'll take my clothes off too, and let's call it even."

"NOOOOO!!! A BEEEAASSTTT!!!"

And thus, a scream tore the morning silence and rose up to pierce the sky. That was the truth.

Chapter 1: Prodigy Knight and Failed Knight

Part 1

Blazers.

They were irregular people, found one-in-a-thousand, who could each materialize his or her soul as a weapon called a Device.

In ages past, they were called magicians and witches. The strongest among them could shape the flow of time using abilities that science didn't explain, and even the weakest were extraordinary. Though they were human, they possessed a supernatural power that surpassed human limits, a power unattainable by the common man through training or technology.

Nowadays, national militaries and even local police forces required Blazers. Yet great power brought responsibility befitting its status. One expression of such responsibility was the mage-knight system, the arrangement where Blazers must graduate from an internationally approved vocational school to receive license and social status as mage-knights—in other words, approval to use their abilities.

Hagun Academy was one of seven mage-knight academies in Japan, a school said to span more than ten times the area of Tokyo Dome[1]. Here, young Blazers spent day after day diligently polishing their skills as student knights.

And in Hagun Academy, Ikki Kurogane—accused of molestation and caught red-handed by dormitory guards—was brought to the board chairman's office. There, a beautiful woman in a suit was sitting on a sofa and smoking a cigarette. Kurono Shinguuji, the new chairman of Hagun, had finished hearing Ikki's explanation on the chain of events, and she replied in a tired voice.

"I see, so you were trying to atone for the accident of seeing her half-naked by stripping yourself. Are you a moron?"

"I thought it was an equitable, gentlemanly idea."

"You were definitely some sort of gentleman."

"No, I wasn't trying to be a lewd gentleman. …Well, now that I think about it, I guess I did suddenly go on a rampage."

"Hah. In other words, after seeing her charmingly naked body, you lost control and took off your clothes without thinking?"

"…It might be how things happened, but could you please not phrase it like that? Aren't you making me sound like a really dangerous guy?"

"Even if you say so, Kurogane, try to imagine that scene after putting yourself in her shoes. In a dormitory with hardly any people because of spring break, you're suddenly interrupted by an unknown boy while changing clothes, and then he throws his clothes off too. How might you see him?"

"Like a really dangerous guy…."

After reexamining things from the girl's perspective like Kurono suggested, Ikki shivered.

"…Haa. I certainly did something unforgivable on Stella-san's first day of studying abroad. I really hope she won't start hating Japan because of this."

"What, you know about Vermillion?"

"I was too startled to recognize the face when I ran into her, but I remembered just a while ago."

Her name was Stella Vermillion, and she was a princess of the Vermillion Empire, a small European nation. It was big news in the media that she was studying abroad in Japan. 『**A prodigy said to appear only once in a decade! Stella Vermillion-sama (15), the second imperial princess of the Vermillion Empire, enrolls at Hagun Academy after getting record marks!**』 Ikki still recalled that article vividly.

"A real princess, and on top of that she enrolled as a student. She's amazing, isn't she?"

"She became number one by a wide margin too, far exceeding the average score for all the categories, and her aura capacity, a Blazer's most important trait, is about thirty times that of a regular incoming student. A monstrous A-Rank Blazer.... Compared to a certain F-Rank who's repeating a year because his attribute scores were too low, there sure is a difference. Don't you agree, 'Worst One'?"

"Leave me alone."

He protested Kurono's sarcasm with a frown, but didn't deny it. He couldn't deny it. After all, Ikki Kurogane only had one tenth the average aura capacity.

"But it's become a real hassle. I invited the girl to Japan despite all the formalities involved in enrolling her here, and something like this happened on her first day. If the matter's not handled well, it could turn into an international incident. So even though you're not at fault, I'll still have you take responsibility. It might feel unreasonable, but take it like a man."

"...I wonder why 'be a man' gets used only in this sort of situation."

Ikki sighed, and at that moment—

"Excuse me."

The door of the chairman's room opened, and the person being discussed, Stella Vermillion, entered.

Unlike before, she was properly dressed in a tasteful dark vest and skirt. The school uniform for Hagun Academy suited her quite well because it brought out the red of her fire-like hair. But what drew

Ikki's eyes was her chest. That huge area, adorned by a ribbon, emitted a strong presence that instantly reminded Ikki of her half-naked figure… but his breath stopped after seeing the girl's expression. She had probably been crying. The skin under her eyes swelled with resentment.

"Sorry."

That was why an apology came from his mouth. Men shouldn't make women cry. Even if it wasn't his fault, the terror she felt in that moment had been real.

"What happened was an unfortunate accident and I wasn't trying to peep on you. But I saw what I saw, so that's why I'll take responsibility as a man. Bake me or grill me, you can do whatever you like."

"…How resolute. Is this what they call the spirit of a samurai?"

"More like the spirit of a poor speaker."

Ikki showed a rueful smile to Stella, who seemed to understand his remorse. She also softened her expression and returned a thin smile.

"Haha…. Honestly, meeting a molester right after arriving in Japan made me start to think that this was the lowest kind of place. I might've turned this into a diplomatic uproar, but I've calmed down a bit thanks to you. Because you've shown me such strong spirit, it wouldn't do for me not to respond equanimously as a member of an imperial family."

The hostility from when she first entered the room disappeared. After seeing that favorable expression, Ikki also lightened his demeanor. He had thought an imperial princess would be moody and hard to please, but now she seemed like someone who'd accept a proper conversation.

"Ikki, in deference to your gallantry—I'll forgive this matter if you perform harakiri."

…But in reality, it was only true in his head.

"No, please wait a minute! Isn't harakiri too harsh a punishment even for a major crime!?"

"Well, wouldn't capital punishment be expected after assaulting a princess? Seriously, you should be tied to a log and stoned to death by all the nation's citizens. It's quite a privilege that I'm letting you off this way instead."

"Stoning is better suited to making steak tartare than to punishment, isn't it?"

"Just letting you die with honor is a great indulgence, a bloody sacrifice on my part."

"I'm the one who ends up bleeding!"

"Hahaha. Kurogane, you give such clever responses."

"No, please stop laughing. As an educator you should keep the school from hosting an execution!"

"Kurogane, we can purchase peace between Japan and the Vermillion Empire just by offering you up. Don't you think it's a very good deal?"

"How can a deal be good if it costs human life!?"

From Ikki's perspective, someone was getting ripped off here.

"H-Hey, Stella-san, can't you think of another way to settle this?"

"What are you so dissatisfied about? Isn't harakiri considered honorable for Japanese men?"

"No, I was born in Heisei[2]! And I don't have any connections with samurai! And I crossed over to the hip-hop side long ago, yo!"

"Ha, that persona sounds really fake."

"If you don't feel like stopping this then please stay quiet!"

Ikki cried out at Kurono's interruption, but Stella's expression darkened again at Ikki's resistance.

"What's with you!? Didn't you just say that I could do whatever I wanted, whether it was to bake you or grill you!? If you're a man then stick to your word!"

"N-No, that was just a quirky Japanese expression. I didn't know you were really planning on baking and grilling me!"

"Kurogane, you're full of excuses and evasions, aren't you? Remind me, what was it you said about taking responsibility as a man?"

Noisy chairman! His life was more important!

"…I-In any case, just because I saw you in your underwear, you can't make me pay with my life!"

"J-Just, you said!? I… I can't believe it! I can't believe it, you pervert! Is that what you said after despoiling the body of an unmarried princess!? Even my father has never seen it!"

Flames of anger ignited in Stella's eyes at Ikki's careless words. No… it wasn't just her eyes burning. The air around Stella was starting to release scorching heat and light.

Come to think of it, the newspaper wrote something about her ability—

"Unforgivable! I'll personally turn a perverted, molesting, insolent commoner like you to cinders! Serve me, *Lævateinn*[3]!"

An aurora shined forth to create a zone of heat in the chairman's room, and a long sword clad in flames appeared in Stella's hand. It was a Device made from a Blazer's soul.

Holy Sword—
Demon Bow—
Cursed Tool—
Blessed Tool—

Passed down through legends with various forms and shapes, a Device was a magic staff. By using that tool as a medium, a Blazer could use her abilities, her Noble Arts.

And the Crimson Princess's ability produced incandescent flames that burn any target to nothing—!

"Prepare yourself, you degenerate! I'll erase you from this world without leaving a speck behind!"

"A-Are you serious!?"

"Excuses are useless—!"

The sword of flame swung downwards. Facing that, Ikki also took a defensive stance.

"Come forth, *Intetsu*[4]!"

It was a Japanese long sword made of raven-black steel. The F-Rank Knight, Ikki Kurogane, used his Device *Intetsu* to block Stella's downward swing.

But—

"A flimsy defense!"

"Hot!"

"Of course it's hot! My Lævateinn, clad in the flames of my Noble Art *Dragon Breath*[5], goes up to three thousand degrees centigrade! Even if you block, I can burn my enemies with the might of the dragon empress alone!"

"What a ridiculous ability…!"

Feeling vexed from being so close, Ikki used all his strength to put some distance between them. But—

"Ha, hahaha…. stupid boy. There's no way I'd let you escape in a small room like this. I'll disintegrate you soon enough, and with that I'll erase the villain who ruined my purity before marriage!"

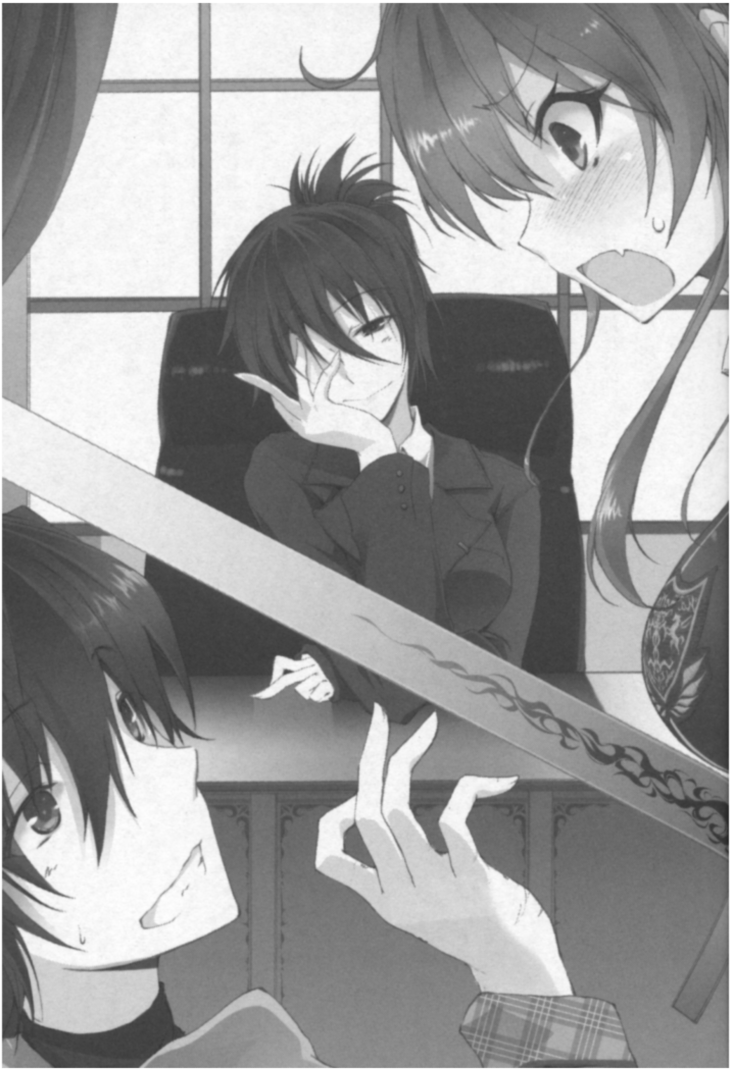
"Wait, wait! Please calm down a little! You call it 'ruined', but I haven't actually done anything that scandalous, right!?"

"Liar! Even though you were ravishing my bare body with i-i-indecent eyes!"

"Certainly, I was staring, but that was… that was, erm… that wasn't because I was thinking lecherous things! It's just, how do I say this—I was mesmerized because you were so beautiful!"

"Fueh!?"

In an instant, Stella's boiling-mad face blushed far redder. Ikki thought that he had needlessly angered her more, and he started to sweat, but—



"W-W-What are you s-saying, idiot! C-Calling an unmarried maiden b-beautiful. Th-This is exactly why commoners with no delicacy are so…!"

Lævateinn suddenly lost its raging flames and dimmed to small flickering sparks. The girl who was filled with so much enmity just a moment ago now started to fidget, looking uncomfortable but also a little happy. When he examined her face, her brow that had been standing up now hung down powerlessly, and her eyes were moist from bewilderment. She seemed to be embarrassed.

That's surprising. I thought someone as beautiful as Stella-san would be used to praise.

Anyhow, Stella's fervor collapsing was a good opportunity. Taking the initiative, he tried to calm Stella down.

"Setting that aside, this happened in the first place because you mistook your room and started changing clothes in mine, so please spare me from committing harakiri."

But at Ikki's argument, Stella's face went grim once more.

"What kind of irrational justification is that!? You were the one who entered my room of your own accord! I opened that room with the key I received properly from Madam Chairman, so it couldn't have been my mistake!"

"…Eh?"

Wait a minute. Now that he thought about it, Ikki had definitely locked his room before he went out. Even if Stella made a mistake, there was no way she could enter, but she had been inside. Why?

Stella uttered the reason just now. Kurono had given her a key.

"What's the meaning of this, Chairman?"

"Ha, hahahaha…."

"…Madam Chairman?"

When both of them looked at her in unison, Kurono started laughing as if she couldn't hold it anymore—

"Heh, no, sorry about that. This turned into something so interesting that I felt a little impish. Well, you don't have to ask, because it's exactly how it sounds. Hagun Academy's dormitories place two people per room. Kurogane should already know that. In other words, neither one of you mistook your rooms. Simply put… you two are roommates."

—and she said something incredible.

"EEEEEEEEEHHH!?"

Part 2

"...What do you mean, Madam Chairman? M-Me, roommates with this pervert!?"

"That's exactly what I mean, Stella Vermillion. Is there a problem?"

"A huge one!"

Ikki frowned.

"I agree. Hagun Academy's dorms certainly do put two people in each room, but I've never heard of a boy and a girl sharing."

"That's been true up through last year, before I became chair of the board of directors. Kurogane, didn't I already tell you about my policy?"

"...To enforce a doctrine of pure merit, based completely on actual combat performance... wasn't it?"

"Right. Unlike the other six knight academies, Hagun produced no notable assets in the past year. We're on a losing streak even in the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, which the seven schools sponsor each year to select the strongest student knight. I was called by the board to reorganize this place, and that room assignment is the first step. It's not about how many people or what their genders are. I'm putting fellow knights with similar strengths together in the same room. After all, when equal fighters draw near one another, competition naturally sparks between them. This room assignment is a scheme to invoke that competition intentionally."

Kurono haughtily revealed her plans as if to say, "Isn't it great?" Ikki had an issue with that explanation, though.

"Then isn't what you're doing even weirder? Among the incoming students, isn't Stella-san number one by a large margin? Why would she be in the same room as me, the worst student who's even repeating a year?"

"Re-Repeating? You, you're repeating the same grade level?"

"It's embarrassing, but my overall rank is F."

"F…. Me and an F-Rank, calling us knights of similar strength! Wh-What do you mean by this!?"

"Haha, well… how do I say this. You guys are a special case. Frankly speaking, there's nobody as excellent as Vermillion, and nobody as deficient as Kurogane. In other words, you're both leftover students with no suitable partner, so I could only pair the two of you. Do you understand now?"

"Who could understand that!?"

Bam! Stella struck the chairman's office table with one palm and continued to protest.

"I-In the first place, it's absurd for boys and girls like us to share a room when we're the same age! What will you do if some mistake happened!?"

"Oh, Vermillion thinks that when boys and girls of the same age live together, a mistake will happen? I'd love to hear about it~"

"Th-That's… erm… uuu…."

Sympathizing with Stella who was already teary-eyed from shame, Ikki also protested to Kurono.

"Why are you playing like a drunken old man?"

Kurono just smiled as if she was joking, but didn't change her mind.

"At any rate, this decision has already been made. There are also boy-girl pairs besides you two, but you don't have to consider that to make your choice. Vermillion, I won't give you special treatment just because you're a princess. If you don't like this arrangement, all you have to do is drop out of school, you know?"

Drop out of school. Stella was visibly startled by that phrase. She had deliberately crossed continents and come to Japan for studying abroad, and while Ikki didn't know her goals or intentions for doing so, she definitely shouldn't be willing to drop out.

In the end, even Stella couldn't help but fold.

"…I understand."

Ikki looked at Stella's defeated face.

"Are you okay with it?"

"I-I don't really have a choice if that's the school policy, do I?"

Stella replied in a discouraged tone, then raised three fingers.

"But for us to live together, I'll have you follow three conditions!"

Ikki was also unsure about this new school system, so he had no obligation to heed her demands… but since he was a boy and one year her senior, he thought he'd cooperate at least this much.

"If they're not anything ridiculous like top academic marks, high income, or growing taller, then I can make the effort."

"I don't want those sorts of things. Even you can fulfill my conditions quite easily."

She had three.

"Don't speak to me, don't open your eyes, and don't breathe."

"If he did that, Kurogane would probably die, right?"

But Stella ignored Kurono's comment.

"If you can follow these three rules then I'm fine with you living in front of the room!"

"And in the end I'm still chased out!?"

"What, you can't do it?"

"I can't follow such messed up conditions! Won't you let me breathe at least!?"

"No way! You'll probably try to sniff me using that as an excuse, you pervert!"

"I'll breathe with my mouth! That way I can't smell you—"

"No good! You'll probably try to taste the air I exhale with your tongue, you pervert!"

"I'm not gonna do that! I don't have a princess's creativity!"

"Then drop out of school! If you do, I can live in the room alone!"

"That's so one-sided!"

Kurono, who had just been spectating, arrived at a solution.

"What a pain. At this rate, the argument won't end no matter how much you argue. Then let's do this. You two have a mock battle, and the winner gets to decide the rules. As knights who clear their destined path with their own blade, you should have no objections, right?"

In other words, the two would fight a straightforward mock battle, and whoever won would have his or her way—a very simple solution. It was common practice for knights to settle disputes among themselves.

"Yeah, that seems fair, right? Then let's do that, Stella-san."

Ikki quickly approved, and Stella also consented, but—

"W-Wha!?"

—but Stella turned her eyes toward him, and her voice flipped in tone.

"Eh? You still don't like it?"

"N-No, it's not about like or dislike.... Y-You... do you understand what you're saying?"

"...Did I say something strange?"

"An F-Rank! A 'Failed Knight' who can't even pass grade levels in school! There's no way you can win against an A-Rank knight like me, right!?"

Ikki understood what Stella was trying to say. Indeed, if a failure like him—who couldn't even satisfy the school's advancement criteria—were to say "Let's settle it with a mock battle" to an authentic, promising, once-in-a-decade prodigy, such a challenge would step far past mere recklessness.

But... Ikki smiled.

"But you know, it won't be clear if we don't fight it out."

Stella wasn't willing to concede, and Ikki couldn't drop out either. He also had his reasons for becoming a mage-knight. Since that was the case, this obstacle probably couldn't be resolved no matter how much they discussed it, which left no choice but to try something else.

That was why Ikki told Stella that they should fight. At those words... Stella snapped.

"Nmounyaa~! I can't hold it back anymore~! This commoner! Not only did he commit the crime of peeking and exposing himself to a princess like me, but this Failed Knight said he could win against me too! I... I haven't been disgraced like this even once in my life! What kind of wretched country is this!?"

Stella faced Ikki with murderous eyes and made her declaration.

"Okay, I get it. I understand. I'll have a fight with you. But after making such a fool out of me, you won't get away with just betting the right to make rules for living together! Whoever loses will submit to the winner for life, becoming a slave that obeys his master's demands like a dog no matter how humiliating they are! How's that!?"

"E-Eeeehh? Th-That's, isn't that going a bit far...."

"Losing your nerve is useless at this point. If you want to curse something, curse your thoughtlessness that made me so serious. This is no longer a mock battle, but a duel!"

"Sounds pretty heavy. Since you're doing it, use training arena three. I'll submit the authorization."

"C-Chairman! Please don't wrap this up for your own convenience!"

But Ikki's protest arrived too late, and Stella gave a "Prepare yourself! Hmph!" before stalking out of the room, leaving him behind. She was probably heading towards the third arena already.

"...Haa. It turned into something dreadful, didn't it? This kind of thing is really troublesome, Chairman...."

"Ha ha ha. You really don't want to become a slave?"

"Of course not. Win or lose, I don't want to do either one."

"Win or lose, you say.... You just saw that girl's power, didn't you? A red scorching flame is waiting when you approach, a threat to her opponents just by being there. Not many people in the world have abilities so focused on violence, and none of her public reviews are fabrications either. But even after seeing that, you still intend to win? ...What an interesting man."

"She's someone I'll fight eventually. You should know that best, since you were the one who said, 'If you become champion in the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, I'll let you graduate even with bad attribute scores.' Stella-san will definitely appear in the Festival. It's just a question of facing her sooner or later."

"Then there's no need to hesitate, right? If you win and set the terms you want, you can toss out the talk about being a slave. Settle everything that way."

Slapping Ikki's shoulder with a **pah!**, Kurono also exited the office. Ikki, who was left in the room, let out another of who knows how many sighs that day.

Well, certainly… all I have to do is win.

Of course, he knew it would be hard. His opponent was strong among the most strong, formidable among the most formidable. Ikki understood that, despite witnessing her strength for only a moment. Stella's talent was overwhelming. Her power acted in concert with her emotions, an overwhelming aura that leaked out even without her noticing, and Ikki's magic was nonexistent in comparison, like an ant facing an elephant. There was no need to guess what the outcome would be; even putting them on the same scale would be outrageous. And yet….

No matter how hopeless the situation may be, a fight I can neither lose nor avoid will surely come.

He had resolved himself long ago. On the day he saw that man's smile, he had decided he would walk this path.

"So I have to do this, right?"

Muttering that, Ikki also left the board chairman's office. To head to the stage of his duel, to shape his own destiny with the blade of his soul.

Part 3

Mage-knights bolstered their country's battle strength, and they naturally sought combat skill. Such skill was needed not just for warfare, but also to oppose terrorist groups and criminal syndicates that abused Blazer powers. For mage-knight training, a number of dome-shaped arenas dotted the Hagun Academy campus. The interior of each dome included a space for combat with a roughly hundred-meter diameter, with audience seats built on a bowl shape around that space.

In the third training arena, Ikki Kurogane and Stella Vermillion stood twenty meters apart with Kurono Shinguuji waiting between them as referee. Above them, twenty or so second- and third-year students who had been training, and many visitors who had heard about a mock battle being suddenly declared in the middle of spring break, fixed their gazes on the field. They were all staring at the supernova who had entered the academy with great fanfare, Stella Vermillion.

「So that girl's the Vermillion's 'Crimson Princess'?」

「A really beautiful girl, huh?」

「Such pretty hair.... It's so wonderful, as if it's actually burning....」

「But who's her opponent?」

「...Wait, isn't that Kurogane, the guy repeating the first year?」

「A repeater? Why's she fighting someone like that? Isn't Stella-san supposed to be an A-Rank prodigy?」

「Dunno... hey, aren't there any second-years who shared classes with him? I wanna know what kind of knight he was.」

「I was in the same class, but because that guy didn't even meet the minimum requirements for combat practice, I haven't really seen him in action before.」

「Forget about advancing years… not rated high enough to even practice? Isn't that just too lame?」

「What the heck, that's boring. Won't the princess kill him instantly?」

Stella laughed sourly as gossip floated down from the audience.

"The more I hear, the more useless you sound. Shouldn't you just stop trying to become a mage-knight and live as a regular citizen?"

"Well, maybe I should, but I won't be sure if I don't fight for it."

"Don't you get it? You'll become my slave if you lose, you know."

"Of course I get it, but that's if I lose. It's fine if I win."

"…Even now, you still intend to beat me?"

"That's why I made the effort to come here."

Ikki returned a troubled but warm smile to Stella's stinging words, but he didn't step back from his starting position. He was already prepared to do this. That, for some reason, greatly irritated Stella.

Effort… was it?

「If I work hard then I can beat talent.」

Stella hated ordinary people who thought like that. Whenever they lose to someone like her, they say,

「I worked hard but still couldn't beat talent.」

As if they were the only ones who put in effort.

As if… I win only by my talent.

It made her angry. Stella hadn't been this strong right from the start. No, she was quite the opposite back then. During her childhood, she didn't have the aptitude needed to even aspire to knighthood. She couldn't control her overwhelming power, and sometimes she even burned her own body. Her father and mother, and everyone around her, thought that she'd never become a knight.

But even so… Stella didn't give up. She knew she had potential. A strong Blazer was crucial for a small state like Vermillion, and just like Samurai Ryouma who led this modest land of the Far East to victory in the Second World War, a strong enough mage-knight empowered his country to negotiate with larger nations as an equal. If she could learn to handle that power, it would become a vital asset for protecting the people of her kingdom, so Stella didn't give up. She continued training no matter how much everyone around her objected. And after three long years, she mastered the Dragon Breath. She was critically injured several times in the process, but even so, she became who she was now by great effort.

That's why I can't stand being dismissed with cheap words like talent or prodigy!

"Now then, we'll start the mock battle. Both sides, materialize your Device in illusionary form."

"Come forth, *Intetsu*."

"Serve me, *Lævateinn*."

Stella summoned *Lævateinn*, the sword shaped from her soul, into a form that deals no physical damage to humans but cleaves away physical stamina and strength directly. And she vowed to the boy in front of her—she'd crush him.

Talent can't be defeated. A prodigy is special.

To erase such self-deception, she'd crush him utterly.

"Alright. Well then, LET'S GET STARTED!"

And so, the fight between a prodigy knight and a failed knight began.

Part 4

"Haaaaa!"

The match started, and Stella instantly dashed toward Ikki, swinging down her sword now covered in red flames. The swing might've looked crude to unlearned observers, but it was a precise and powerful strike.

Yet a wide swing was just a wide swing. Ikki saw through her movement and raised *Intetsu* to receive it—but he immediately aborted that action and took a sudden step back. An instant later, *Lævateinn* struck the arena floor violently and the entire space shook like an earthquake.

"Wise choice. If you received that blow, it wouldn't have ended with just a few scratches."

"What an outrageous attack. So you weren't being serious in the chairman's office?"

"That's right. If I became serious in such a place, the entire school building would be destroyed."

Grinning broadly, Stella immediately took pursuit, and Ikki drew another step back to widen the distance. If he tried to stop such a swing head on, his arm would be crushed. Stella's weapon was a long sword, a heavy weapon, and it was common sense when facing heavy weapons that he'd have an advantage in retreating speed.

But common sense couldn't apply to a monstrous opponent like Stella.

"Slow. Too slow!"

"Wha—"

Whoosh! The wind roared, and Stella immediately caught up to him.

"Did you think you could beat me when it comes to speed? Too bad, but magic isn't limited to offense alone. I can increase my mobility several times over by concentrating magic at the bottom of my feet and releasing it in a burst. And my aura capacity is thirty times greater than a normal Blazer, so it won't become spent keeping up with the likes of you. In other words, you can't beat me in either power or speed!"

If Ikki were to compare her with something, then "ultra-high mobility heavy tank with infinite fuel" would be appropriate. Ikki laughed bitterly at that kind of unfair ability, whose owner was now charging right at him.

So this is an A-Rank, huh?

Even the past generations of Sword-Art Festival winners, the Seven Stars Sword Kings, were mostly B- or C-Ranks. They were the ideal Ikki aimed for, but an A-Rank couldn't be limited to a student knight's ideals. The A-Rank knights up through the modern day have all, without exception, been great heroes who carved their names onto history.

An outstanding talent that appeared only once a decade—the public view was wholly accurate. Towards Ikki, who had just been made aware of that fact, the Crimson Princess brandished her blazing sword and swung it in an inescapable strike that could cleave the ground itself.

Now that he couldn't dodge her strikes anymore, Ikki also responded with his weapon. The swordfight had begun, and clear sounds of clashing metal resounded like music in the ears of the arena's spectators.

「Oooooh…!」

Their cheers rose as they watched the figure creating *Lævateinn*'s burning arcs.

This was a knight who polished her sword techniques. Few mage-knights excelled in martial arts or swordsmanship, because they could become far stronger by training Blazer abilities instead of physical skills. That belief was held by both educators and society, so knight evaluations didn't include such skills, and while only mediocre mage-knights shared such thinking, mediocre knights were the majority.

The minority, the truly strong knights, would master physical skills alongside Blazer abilities, because they had an unflagging will to improve. They would absorb every tactic that could empower them, develop their strength, and reach for ever higher summits.

Stella Vermillion stood among that minority. She, who won the sword tournament of the Vermillion Empire, used her Imperial Arts[6] as if she was dancing, but with enough force to press Ikki. It took Ikki, still trying to open a gap between them, all he had just to defend against those strikes. He kept retreating backwards again and again.

「Of course it'll turn out like this. The repeater, he's being completely overpowered.」

「Yeah, it feels like all he's doing is running away.」

「Just a matter of time now, huh?」

At this unsurprising outcome, a cold mood fell over the spectators. But—

What… is this?

Stella Vermillion felt something painfully off about this situation. Her sword dealt strikes that could produce earthquakes, could crush an enemy in one hit without fail. Overpowering an opponent without crushing him should be impossible, because her attacks couldn't be blocked so casually. But what was happening in this duel? Stella should be one-sidedly battering her opponent, but she was the one sweating.

Turn out like this? Running away? Just a matter of time? Those impressions were dead wrong. Stella herself had realized that.

I'm being… set up!

"Haaa!"

Stella brought her *Lævateinn* down on the enemy before her. Ikki received that strike with his *Intetsu*—but without stopping there, he rode the force of the strike and swiftly leaped backward, widening the distance between them once again.

…Again!

From afar it certainly seemed like Stella's strikes were pushing Ikki back, but the reality was different. Against his tactics, her strikes were being completely negated. Using a soft defense that slowly drained away power—that might sound easy, but doing it was quite difficult. If the strength in blocking was even a little bit too high then his arm would be pulverized, and if it was even a tiny bit too low then he'd be cut down. The calculations of power, angle, timing—missing even one of these factors meant immediate failure, yet Stella's opponent handled all that without so much as breaking a sweat. At this realization, Stella felt an indescribable anxiety. It was an alarm bell, her sixth sense warning that the enemy before her was very dangerous!

"Are you only good at running away!?"

As if trying to dispel that feeling, Stella kept on slashing at Ikki.

But he didn't reply. The troubled but warm smile he sported just a while ago had disappeared. Now he wore an expression so serious it could be terrifying, and he was calmly watching every movement Stella made.

What irritating eyes!

As if her clothes, skin, and muscles were being read fiber by fiber, her every little act was being studied. And from that gaze, she realized that Ikki was trying to understand the Imperial Arts from her movements.

"My sword style isn't so simple that you can see through it easily!"

"...No, I already got it."

In an instant, the flow of the battle turned. Only five minutes had passed since the start of the match when Ikki Kurogane began to attack for the first time.

It might've seemed like a suicidal action at first glance. In a head-on clash between swordsmen, what could he do with just honed technique against an opponent with that much offensive force? He could only fall before such scorching firepower. It should've been inevitable, but—

"Kuh!"

But Stella was the one who retreated. Ikki was pushing Stella back with his weapon. How? The method lay with the sun-like orbit *Intetsu* was tracing. It was, in fact, Stella's Imperial Arts.

"Impossible...! How can you be using it?"

As she asked, something flashed through Stella's mind.

"You don't mean, you copied my style during these exchanges!?"

"Something like that. I've been despised ever since I was a child, so no one ever taught me, and all I could do was watch others and steal their styles. That's why I'm quite good at these kinds of tactics. I can grasp most sword techniques with only a minute of trading blows."

Swordsmanship describes its own knowledge, style describes its own history, and breathing describes its own principle. If one followed the branches and leaves of a sword style and arrived down at the root, then it wouldn't be hard to grasp that style's techniques and combinations, or its approach in facing different situations. This was what Ikki was saying.

"And if I can understand the style that far, I can also create techniques that outperform my opponent's."

What was the ultimate way to surpass an opponent's sword style? Simply correct all the flaws of that style to create a more perfect one, and the new would be plainly superior to the old. The new style would account for all the old style's faults, and even compensate for its weaknesses. It would eclipse its precursor in every offensive and defensive situation.

"Creating that sword style in the middle of battle is my technique, Blade Steal[7]. Because Stella-san's techniques were so well-engrained, it took me two minutes to steal it and thirty seconds to surpass it. But now I have a solid grasp, so I'll also be attacking from here on."

「H-Hey. Doesn't the princess look like she's being pushed back!?」

Stella was falling behind visibly. The audience started stirring up at the unexpected development, but the one most surprised was Stella herself, and not only because she had lost in sword skill. She was surprised because her prized style had been copied, and moreover, Ikki had refined the style enough to surpass it. Just by looking at her sword swings, he could grasp the wisdom of a technique, read its history, and find its secrets. That devilish insight, it could even be called a reflective magic mirror. And on top of everything, he had done all this without using a bit of magic.

For this boy, receiving fierce attacks from Stella Vermillion and surpassing her Imperial Arts were nothing more than feats of general swordsmanship. How much training must he have had to gain such expertise?

Strong…!

She could no longer deny it. Comparing just their sword skills, this boy was several levels above her. If the duel was restricted to weapons alone, it wouldn't even be a fair fight.

Stella understood that. It was one of her strengths that she admitted that. But it was also a strength of the A-Rank knight Stella Vermillion, the Crimson Princess, that she continued to strive against a stronger opponent.

If her sword style was seen through, then she could exploit that fact. Stella took the stance to swing *Lævateinn* downwards. Ikki swung *Intetsu* upwards in response. She had sent her downward arc to crush his guard, and Ikki had already grasped the speed and power of the strike when she took the initial stance, so his response was inevitable. But that itself was Stella's trap!

It worked!

Stella abandoned the swing and jumped backwards with a grin. If Ikki had seen through her style, then he should surely be caught off guard, because Stella, who had only attacked thus far, was retreating for the first time.

Ikki had taken the initiative after seeing through her style, and he immediately fell for the feint. His slashing attack missed by a wide margin. Aiming for that moment, Stella struck with her *Lævateinn* at Ikki's exposed flank. It was a sudden variation of tactics for Stella, who had only been attacking straightforwardly until now.

Intetsu's black blade, which was slashing empty space, could not respond to this change in timing. *Lævateinn's* blade smoothly scythed toward Ikki's unguarded torso.

It had to work, but—

"Your sword is half-asleep, you know."

—*Lævateinn*'s blade never reached Ikki's side. It had been blocked.

N-No way!?

He had changed her rhythm, stopped her approach, and even entered her blind spot. *Intetsu*'s blade was supposed to be too far off to possibly react to her cut, but her cut was still blocked!

How!? The answer to that question was—his hilt. Ikki had blocked Stella's feint-enabled strike with *Intetsu*'s hilt, using the slight gap between his hands as they clasped the grip.

Just what kind of motion perception does this guy have!?

"Aiming for victory carelessly after feeling pressured? Slashing while retreating isn't your style. Even someone like me can stop such a weak attack. That move was your downfall."

Saying that, Ikki pushed *Lævateinn* away, creating a large opening in her guard.

"Haaaaa!"

And with *Intetsu*'s blade, he slashed down at Stella's defenseless form.

Part 5

「Is it over!?」

「It's a perfect hit. That should end it.」

「No way, the A-Rank Stella-san was beaten like this....」

「Wasn't she just unprepared? Otherwise, this is impossible....」

「...No, wait! Look at that!」

The confused spectators turned their gazes to Stella's right shoulder. *Intetsu*'s blade had indeed landed there, but it was completely stopped. Ikki's full-powered strike couldn't damage Stella at all.

"...So in the end, it turns out like this."

Setting aside his exasperation, Ikki once again took a large step back to escape the scorching heat, increasing the gap between them. His opponent was using magic as a shield, and an attack without equally strong magic couldn't harm a shielded Blazer. Ikki's magic was too limited, too weak. However excellent his techniques might be, lacking a Blazer's most important trait meant he couldn't even pierce the magic power Stella was releasing subconsciously.

Aura capacity—the total spiritual energy that a Blazer could spend in using his abilities. That attribute couldn't be increased with effort. It was locked at birth, bound by the weight of destiny... a human being's predetermined value.

Great people were given greatness to make great achievements. From the moment they were born, everyone had a place in an unquestionable hierarchy. In other words, the talent Stella had carried since birth became a firm wall and stopped Ikki's sword.

"It leaves a bad taste, winning like this…."

"As I thought, Stella-san understood it right away. My Intetsu can't injure you at all."

"Naturally. And because I understood, I challenged you to this duel not just in magic, but also in swordsmanship, to show that my strength comes from more than talent. But it didn't go how I wanted… I'll admit it. This battle, I'll only win because of that talent."

Ikki was strong. The words about effort he had uttered weighed more than those of her past opponents. With the talent of a normal Blazer, or even a bit less, he would've beaten Stella in this match. It was vexing, but Ikki didn't even have that. If he gave "I lost to her talent" as an excuse for his defeat, she wouldn't deny it. He had a right to say such things.

He was… that strong. That was why—

"I'll finish this with sincere respect."

Suddenly, Stella took a large leap backwards. She retreated to the ring-shaped arena's border line, at the wall that separated the arena from the audience seats.

With sincere respect. Ikki felt uneasy about Stella backing so far away after saying those words—but that unease was immediately quashed by a heavier sensation.

"Pierce the blue sky, blaze of purgatory."

The moment Stella pointed her *Lævateinn* up at the air, the flames covering the sword burned with more fury and heat—and soon the sword lost its form, taking the shape of a pillar of light that melted the arena's domed roof.

「W-What is thiiiiis!!!」

「This is too insane! Is she still human!?」

The blade that easily extended a hundred meters upward was shining with the sun's own brilliance, an unopposable scarlet conflagration. For this A-Rank knight, the Crimson Princess, it was her strongest Noble Art. Stella no longer intended to fight with a sword. She would no longer be overconfident. Ikki was a swordsman who far surpassed her, and because she admitted that, she chose to end this battle by destroying the arena with her unfair talent.

"It's over. Accept your loss. That should be easier on you too."

Just before unleashing her attack, she spoke those words with a dragon's dispassion. Stella had believed that anyone strong enough to overwhelm her like this would triumph elsewhere no matter the difficulties, but she hadn't accounted for this boy whose lack of talent forced him onto the path of a Failed Knight. That was why Stella would defeat Ikki for his sake as well, using the absolute power of her talent!

"Katharterio Salamandra—!!!"
Καθαρτήριο Σαλαμάνδρα
[8]

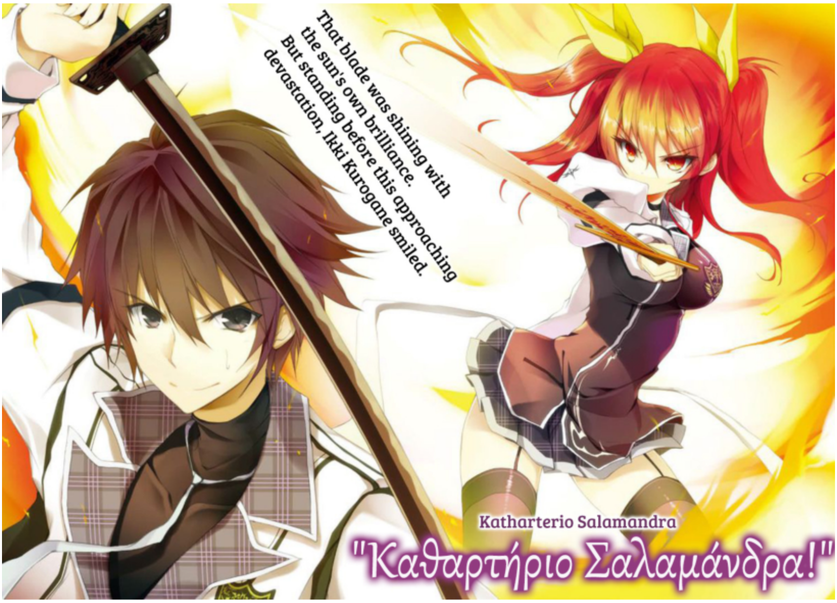
The descending blade of light knew only ruination, burning the entire arena.

「Uh, uwaaa!」

「Run for it! We'll get swallowed up—!」

"Hey hey…. Is this really a move for a one-on-one fight?"

As the arena crumbled down, the spectating students started to flee in a screaming mob, and Kurono watched it all with a bitter expression.


That blade was shining with
the sun's own brilliance.
But standing before this approaching
devastation, Ikki Kurogane smiled.
Katharterio Salamandra
"Καθαρτήριο Σαλαμάνδρα!"

But standing before this approaching devastation, Ikki Kurogane smiled.

"My little sister used to often say, 'Brother can become anything other than a mage-knight, so he should aim for that.' Certainly she might be right, since I don't have the talent."

If Ikki Kurogane wanted to be a mage-knight, he'd have to at least win in the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, but trying for that victory was as reckless as climbing a waterfall in a bamboo boat. Ikki probably knew that better than anyone.

"But I can't step back now, because becoming a knight is my dream. If I gave up, I couldn't forgive myself for breaking the promise that binds us."

So—

"So I wondered, how can the weakest beat the strongest? How can I exceed my own weak self? Here and now, I'll show you my answer."

Ikki pointed the tip of *Intetsu* at Stella and said,

"Here, with my greatest weakness, I'll defeat your greatest strength—!"

At that moment, Ikki's whole body and *Intetsu*'s full length started to shine.

Luminous blue that flickered ever so slightly like flame—was it an elemental power similar to hers? Stella thought so for a moment but soon abandoned the idea. No, it was the light of magic power itself growing to the point of visibility.

His power… is increasing…!?

Impossible. Magic power could neither rise nor fall from its owner's level at birth. Then what was happening? Stella couldn't understand it. She had never heard of an ability that raises magic power. But she did understand one thing: the current *Intetsu* glowing with blue light had the power to strike her down.

—But so what!? No matter what kind of power he possessed, all things of heaven and earth burn to ashes before the sun!

Slash him! I can take victory just doing that!

The distance between them was more than sixty meters. It didn't matter what her opponent tried, because her blade of light would reach him first.

But this boy—he said he'd break through that reasoning!

"Wha!?"

In the instant that the blade of light fell upon Ikki, he vanished. No, he just jumped fast enough while evading the light that he seemed to disappear.

Stella was dumbfounded after missing her target.

What was that, just now!?

Despite her surprise, she immediately attacked Ikki with a second swing. Katharterio Salamandra created a sword of heat that had no physical body, and it could reach a target more than a hundred meters away. It wasn't something a flesh-and-blood human could simply evade.

But Ikki did.

The second strike, and then the third. Here and there on the battlefield, Ikki kept moving like a windstorm between her flashing strokes, completely dodging each attack. His movements were impossible to follow. Forget her sword, even her eyes couldn't keep up with Ikki's speed. Eventually, Stella could no longer catch even a rough visual of his position.

"Kuh, what's with that strength!? How can you move like that all of a sudden!?"

"Because that's my ability. Just like how Stella-san can control flames, I also have an ability as a Blazer."

Ikki's ability was… doubling his physical attributes.

It was called the worst among all the abilities a Blazer could have, because even without the boosting of physical attributes, a Blazer could gain far more force or mobility by applying magic. Indeed, Stella had used such magic during this match, and her attributes had multiplied five or six times, not merely doubled. In other words, Ikki's ability was a downgraded version of what every Blazer could do just by using magic.

One could say that it was very appropriate for an F-Rank.

"That's a lie! Those movements, that's far more than just doubled! And besides, I've never heard of magic power also rising alongside physical strength!"

While swinging her sword of light, Stella made this protest. A release of magic power that could be seen by the naked eye, and then movements that couldn't? Such things weren't caused just by doubling physical attributes. Even if she was only talking about physical power, Ikki's had surely jumped more than ten-fold.

Ikki, still moving around like a windstorm while dodging Stella's sword, gave a small and boastful laugh at what she was pointing out.

"That's true, but I'm not using my ability the normal way. Instead, I'm using it at full power."

"Huh!? There's no way you would improve like this just because of enthusiasm!"

"No… I wasn't talking about enthusiasm, but the literal meaning."

"Eh…?"

"I've been thinking about this for a long time. Let's say you were to sprint a hundred meters after saying that you'll do it at full power. Even if you did as you intended, you'll still have spare energy afterward. I thought that was strange. If you really ran while using all of your strength, shouldn't it be weird to even stay conscious afterwards?"

How could that happen? The answer was because humans are alive, and living creatures instinctively want to preserve their lives, their instincts give top priority to survival. No matter how much a person pledges to use his full strength, his subconscious would never allow it. Even if he expends all energy, some amount would still remain so that his body continues to function. This limitation was hardwired into living biology.

Because of that limitation, humans didn't normally use even half of their stamina, strength, or magic power. It was an absolute rule.

But what if someone could break that absolute rule? What if someone, using willpower alone, could remove the limiter that keeps him from exerting his full strength?

"You… you don't mean—!"

"Yes. My magic power hasn't increased. I'm just tapping into power I couldn't before, after willfully exceeding my limitations."

Ikki lacked talent more than anyone else, and he understood that fact better than anyone else. He couldn't close the gap between himself and a prodigy just by working hard, because prodigies also worked hard, and it was insulting to say that they won only by talent. Insufficient effort could widen the gap, but investing effort couldn't shrink it so easily. A difference in talent was that vital a factor, normally.

If he wanted to close the gap anyway, he couldn't be normal any longer. He had no choice but to become a Shura[9]. Ikki didn't avert his eyes from that truth. Focusing on this realization, he had discovered a way. To surpass talent, he could no longer leave any strength unused.

One minute was enough. It was fine to ignore what happened afterward, but for one minute he'd become strong enough to beat anyone.

That was the answer Ikki Kurogane found, so that his greatest weakness can defeat another's greatest strength. Intentionally using all of his vigor and stamina after breaking through his limits, it was a Noble Art that brought out all of his meager power for little more than one minute and multiplies that power several dozen times.

"*Ittou Shura*[10]."

Suddenly Ikki, who was moving around the arena with movements that could no longer even be tracked by human eyes, used his astounding speed to appear at Stella's blind side, and ended everything.

With a **slash**.

At a speed that could be neither dodged nor blocked, without even a chance to scream, Stella took a direct hit from *Intetsu*.

"Ah—"

She felt the ground under her feet dissolving, and then Stella's thoughts fell into darkness. It was a special kind of unconsciousness imposed by an illusionary fatal wound. Just like its name suggested, *Ittou Shura* felled the Crimson Princess with just one cut, and Stella fainted powerlessly.

"That's enough! Winner, Ikki Kurogane!"

Even though Kurono called Ikki's victory, and the stunning result stood before their very eyes, the students in the arena still didn't quite comprehend what had happened. All they could do was stare at the figure of the Failed Knight silently standing there.

Part 6

"…Nn."

Emerging through a bright haze, Stella gradually woke up, and what filled her vision as she opened her eyes was a somewhat low ceiling and—Kurono sitting beside Stella's bed while smoking a cigarette.

"Are you awake, Vermillion?"

"Madam Chairman… where am I?"

"Your room. You collapsed from the fatigue of getting hit by a Device in illusionary form. It's not something we should use an iPS capsule or call a doctor for, so I had you rest here."

Saying that, Kurono released a puff of smoke from lipstick-coated lips.

…Doesn't the student dormitory prohibit smoking?

But Stella wasn't really in the mood to say so out loud.

"So that means… it wasn't all a dream?"

With that realization, her feelings turned gloomy. It seemed her hope wouldn't come true. She'd been beaten, and beaten so completely she could make no excuse for her loss.

"…Haa. I thought I had forgotten it long ago. Losing… certainly does feel like this."

"Well, you shouldn't let it bother you that much. Handicaps aside, Kurogane is a guy who even won a straight fight against me. He's not someone you could defeat as you are now."

"Winning against 'World Clock', the former top third in the world… what the heck is that?"

There was a limit to being a monster.

…No, she couldn't say that. Defeating her inside a single minute was the apex of willpower, something normally unthinkable. What kind of dreadful resolve and determination would someone need to try it? That way of fighting was indeed like a shura. It could be called inhuman.

Ah.

Come to think of it, what happened to that fellow after he used himself up?

"Madam Chairman. That guy, is he alright?"

Kurono lightly nodded at her question.

"He's fine. He was much more seriously injured than you, but it's not so bad that his life was in danger."

After saying so, she looked at the upper level of the bunk bed.

Stella crawled out of the lower bed and looked up to see a pale-faced Ikki lying above in an exercise shirt. His vitality seemed so low that if Stella hadn't heard faint breathing, she'd surely mistake him for a corpse.

"Well, he had enough spare energy to return to his room and change his clothes. If he couldn't leave that much in reserve, the aftermath of his technique would be far too harsh. Kurogane exercised some foresight, at least."

"I don't think that really counts as spare energy."

Ittou Shura was a Noble Art that brought out one's full power while ignoring survival instincts. The user wouldn't even be able to breathe after just one minute of use, so Ikki couldn't use it to fight for long. If he didn't win within that minute, breakdown was unavoidable—a harshly self-destructive tactic. But in mastering such a fickle technique, this boy showed he could conquer even himself.

"Madam Chairman, who exactly is this guy?"

"What do you mean?"

"Please don't play dumb! It's definitely not normal to move so fast my eyes can't even keep up! Could he be one of them? One of those Japanese ninjas!?"

"No, you're totally off…."

"In any case, it's strange for someone like him to be an F-Rank and repeat a year! Please explain to me exactly what's going on!"

"Even if you say that, him being an F-Rank is actually a valid judgment, because the ranking system evaluates Blazer abilities. Mundane skills like swordsmanship, physical fitness, and martial arts aren't included in that evaluation, since such things would probably be ineffective against Noble Arts."

Indeed, mundane skills were nothing compared to overwhelming supernatural power. For example, suppose there existed a master swordsman who could even cut through steel. How would he fight against Stella's flaming sword? His mastery was useless; he could only burn to ashes. Mundane skills were only useful to Blazers when fighting those with equal magic ability.

"That's the general public's way of thinking these days. To put it simply, no system exists to evaluate Kurogane appropriately. And Kurogane, who only excels in physical skills… well, he could only be called the worst. It's rare for someone to have circumstances this bad. If you're a prodigy who appears only once a decade, then he's a dunce that appears only once a decade too. Nothing can really be done about that. You should also understand after facing him directly, since his full-powered strike couldn't harm you even while you were defenseless."

"…Well, there's that… but you haven't explained why he was made to repeat."

"Haven't I?"

"I'm royalty. I know how much countries value strong Blazers, and an academy responsible for training mage-knights should think the same. Not having good evaluations shouldn't be enough reason to make him repeat a year."

Because insurgent organizations had recently started to appear, countries were always promoting the development of strong knights. No reason was enough to undercut that priority.

To Stella's argument, Kurono gave a bitter smile and sighed as though in agreement.

"Haha… well well. You really struck where it hurts."

"As I thought, there's some other reason, isn't there?"

"Yeah, his marks not being sufficient is just the school administration's pretense."

"Pretense…?"

"Indeed. Vermillion, doesn't the name Kurogane ring a bell?"

"There's no way I would know something so plebeian—"

She shouldn't know. That's what she wanted to say, but one person with that surname appeared in her mind.

"Wait, no way… Samurai Ryouma?"

"Exactly. The hero who guided Japan to victory in the Second World War, Samurai Ryouma. His real name is Ryouma Kurogane, and he's Ikki Kurogane's great-grandfather. Even without him, the Kurogane clan is a distinguished family dating from the Meiji era that has produced superior Blazers for generations, and holds strong clout in mage-knight society. That clan put direct pressure on Hagun Academy and said, 'Don't let Ikki Kurogane, the reprobate who fled the Kurogane house, graduate.'"

"Why did they do something like that?"

"To uphold their distinguished family's prestige. If an outlier like an F-Rank was born from their lineage, it would tarnish their name. They probably thought something like that, since knights today emphasize rank more than anything else. The previous academy chairman complied, and started a ridiculous rule about minimum requirements to take combat lessons. In that way, he excluded Kurogane, and repeating the year is the result of that unfairness."

The moment Stella heard that harsh story, she felt an unimaginable resentment deep within her chest.

"Was that something a parent or a teacher should do!?"

"It's regrettable, but there are adults like that in the world. Of course, I have no intention of condoning their actions. After taking up this post, I thoroughly purged those who had a hand in such garbage… but it won't return the year that Kurogane lost. Still, that boy didn't despair. Despite being targeted by his family, treated unfairly, deprived of opportunities, and even derided as trash, he didn't stop believing in his own value. Not seeing prodigies as insurmountable, not running away from his inadequacies. After struggling through all the injustice, he reached the pinnacle where he stands now. By having faith in himself and his values, he wagered all his worth and finally achieved that 'invincible one minute', which can even defeat the Crimson Princess who's called a once-in-a-decade prodigy. Honestly, he's quite special."

Believing in oneself and in one's value, no matter how hopeless the situation. Stella knew very well how hard that was, understood so well it hurt. But fortunately, she had talent. She believed that if she mastered the flames dwelling inside her, her power would help her country greatly. That was why she could push herself onward.

What about Ikki? He really had nothing at all. His had scant magic power, and his Noble Art, a Blazer's trump card, was only the doubling of physical strength. That was painful enough, but the adults around Ikki did all they could to block his way as well. How did he still keep faith and believe in himself?

"Just… just what is pushing him to go that far…!?"

"Who knows? It's not something you'd understand without asking Kurogane himself. I just have a few expectations. Whether he'll really take the summit of the Seven Stars, stuff like that."

Kurono pressed her cigarette into her portable ashtray and once again asked Stella.

"Vermillion. When you came to my office this morning to greet me, do you remember how you replied to my question, 'Why did you come here to study abroad?'"

"Yes. Because if I stayed in that country… I would eventually forget how to aim higher."

That was Stella's reason for leaving Vermillion: the people of her land, of their own accord, were trapping her in the cage of "prodigy". That she could do anything, and wouldn't lose to anyone. If Stella stayed among them, she might've started to believe them. She'd become arrogant, and her heart would rot. Her arrogance would build without foundation, and her will to improve would be chipped away. It had frightened her more than anything, so much that she couldn't let herself remain there any longer. She had to become a much stronger knight to protect her beloved Vermillion Empire.

That was Stella's reason for coming to Japan: to seek out people stronger than herself. To fight strong knights, defeat them, and become the Seven Stars Sword King.

"In that case, Stella Vermillion, try chasing after Kurogane for a year. I'm sure it won't be a waste of time."

At Kurono's forceful air, Stella couldn't give a definite answer.

"I still… don't get it. I still don't know anything about him beyond your words…."

"Well that's true too, I guess."

It wasn't clear whether Stella's response had satisfied Kurono, but Kurono walked towards the exit after giving a nod.

Turning the knob, she opened the door.

"Then you should learn who he is on your own. Like I said, Ittou Shura is a grand technique that can only be used once a day, not holding back the slightest bit of magic, strength, or willpower. And it's an ability that, like a charging horse, can't be stopped partway. He shouldn't wake up for a while… well, hopefully he's not actually dead, just looks like it. He'll get up sooner or later, and if you still don't want to live with him after testing my words, tell me. I'll prepare a special single-person VIP room for you."

After saying that, Kurono left.

Part 7

Stella, now somewhat abandoned, looked up at the upper bunk bed and studied the boy who defeated her.

I'm… certainly not weak.

She wasn't brash enough to think she was the strongest in the world, but she'd never lose to a person of mediocre ability. Ikki was strong, and she was curious about the source of that strength. She wanted to know how he could continue to believe in himself without all that mistreatment overcoming him.

"…Kurogane. Ikki."

As she spoke that name, a mysterious sweetness made her heart lightly throb. For Stella, this was the first time she wanted to know someone else so much. She couldn't restrain the desire to learn more about the sleeping boy, and the delay from his recovery was unbearable. That was why, after being overwhelmed by the curiosity bubbling inside of her, she climbed the bunk bed's ladder.

Ikki was still sleeping. He might've changed sides while asleep, but now he was lying on his stomach, and she could no longer see his face. She could hear light breathing that matched the gentle movements of his well-built back, so he must have improved quite a bit since a while ago, because the feeling that he might never wake again was no longer there. Stella felt a little relieved at that.

"…Ikki."

She called out his name, but as if defying her, he didn't rouse from his deep slumber. It couldn't be helped. He was sleeping soundly, so it would be rude to wake him up by force. Since her anxiety hadn't subsided yet, Stella decided she should take a stroll outside and come back later.

Yes, as Stella was thinking that—she accidentally peeked into the gap between the shirt and the nape of Ikki's neck. He had a wide back, and the sight had a profound impact that she couldn't imagine from his sheepish smile.

No, his body wasn't that muscular. If anything, it could be considered thin, but the steely strength there made his back seem far more substantial than it actually was.

…Ju-Just a little, it's okay, right? He's facing the other way too.

After conferring with some invisible person in her heart, Stella extended her hands towards Ikki's back, and she slowly started to touch.

"W-Wow…."

Thump thump

When Stella touched him with the palms of her hands, the sensation of Ikki's blood flowing started to enter her. It was strong, and hot enough to burn, but his body felt quite different from steel, as if she was feeling the heat of his vitality.

So this is a boy's… back.

It was her first time touching a boy, and Stella felt like she was dreaming.

"N…mn…."

"Eek…!"

Ikki suddenly turned over, and now he was facing up. Because of that, Stella's right hand got rolled in and pinned under his sleeping body.

Oh no!

If Ikki woke up now, Stella couldn't give any excuse. His body was unexpectedly heavy, so she couldn't pull her hand out and escape. She could yank it, but that might disturb him, and falling off the ladder because she pulled too hard would also be disastrous.

…What choice do I have?

Stella held her breath and climbed further up the ladder. Standing on her knees while taking care not to touch him, she used her left hand to raise Ikki's side slowly… slowly… very slowly.

"Uun…n! …Kuh."

Th-That was close!

Stella felt cold sweat forming on her back. She somehow managed to lift up that side with her free hand and… one way or another succeeded in pulling out her trapped one. Success! But… even so, Stella kept on looking at the sleeping Ikki below her.

"This guy didn't wake up at all."

Well, since he was exhausted, she could understand why he was sleeping so deeply. Seeing Ikki still not stirring, Stella gulped. Now that he had flipped over, she was looking at his slightly exposed abdomen.

A boy's belly….

Even though she might've seen a few before, she had never touched one. What kind of feeling would that bring?

"W-What in the world are you thinking, Stella!? That's no good! For me who's still unmarried, and a princess no less, to take interest in the body of a boy who isn't even my lo-lo-lover or anything… that's disgraceful!"

Wait, it wasn't that bad, was it? Not like she was really holding perverted thoughts or anything. Ikki Kurogane, the first opponent who managed to defeat her—she wanted to learn more about a knight she'd have to face in the future, out of pure curiosity.

That was all. Maybe. More or less.

"I-In any case he saw me naked first, so this makes us even, right…?"

It was sophistry, but Stella seemed to have justified herself that way. Led by her curiosity towards the first knight she lost to, she once again extended her hands towards Ikki's abdomen and put one through the crevice of his shirt. She slowly reached as low as his solar plexus and …gently pulled his shirt up.

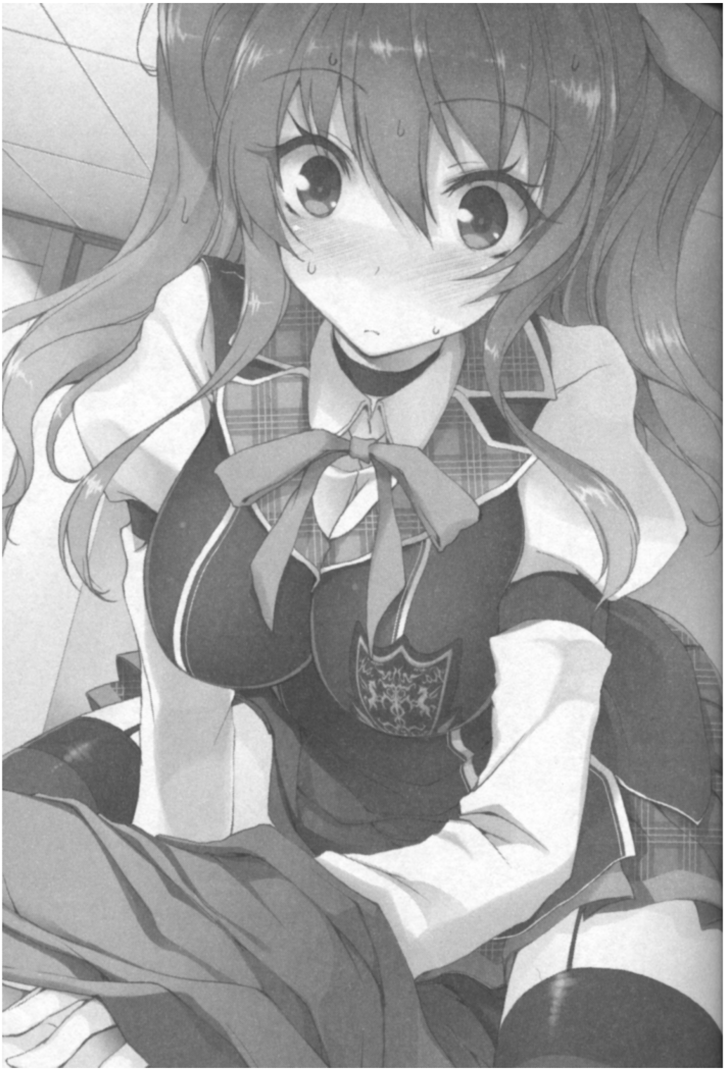
"…This is… a boy's… body…."

When Ikki suddenly stripped that time they met, she didn't really see because of her confusion, but now that she had crawled so close, she could tell his body was unusually toned. The slight shadows of muscles across his body looked completely different from her own as a woman. Of course, feeling them should be different too.

"Haa… haa…."

Stella's brain started to boil at that intense urge to touch. Her head felt feverishly dizzy, and her breathing became heavy and irregular. She could no longer stop herself.

"…Okay."



With a trembling hand, she reached towards Ikki's abdomen, and as she touched him, an electric sensation spread through her from the texture of Ikki's skin and muscles. It was strong while having a subtle flexibility, a sensation she had never felt before, but she easily understood the enormous energy it held.

"Amazing...."

It was not the body of a knight who was stumbling lost in the dark, but one who was striving toward his goals. Stella had always told herself to be a knight before being a woman. She knew how hard it was to hone the body this far, and how hard to maintain such honing.

She couldn't doubt Kurono any longer. Ikki certainly never gave up in despair. His body, as thoroughly hardened as his will, proved so.

But because Kurono hadn't been exaggerating, Stella's desire to learn more about Ikki grew even stronger. The more she knew, the more she wanted to know. This desire started to overheat, enough to suffocate her. She was becoming entranced, lost in a fever without cause or reason, yet it was pleasant, which surprised her even further.

"Haa… What am I doing, I wonder…."

While tracing his abdomen with delicate fingers, she asked that question to some invisible person in her heart, sounding like she was struggling against delirium. But then—

"Err, that's something I want to ask too. Stella-san, what are you doing?"

To Stella who was straddling his waist and touching his skin here and there, Ikki echoed the question back with a face that showed he had no idea what was going on.

"A-Aieeeeeeeeeeeee!?"

Stella instantly released a dreadful scream and recoiled from Ikki.

"Wait! If you jump that hard you'll—"

Ikki's warning was fruitless. After rising so sharply, Stella's head crashed into the ceiling with earth-shattering force and she fell from the upper bunk bed, with a yelp, down to the floor.

"S-Stella-saaaaaan!? Are you okay!? Your head just looked like it—!"

"I-I-I-I-I'm fine! I just fell down and poured some tomato juice on my head, that's all!"

"That's not fine one bit! Because that's tomato juice that came from inside you! Just sit still for now! I'll prepare first aid so just sit still!"

Part 8

"That should do it."

Ikki treated Stella with the emergency kit from his drawer, to Stella's embarrassed gratitude.

"You're quite good."

"I've lived alone since middle school, so I can do at least this much."

Well, it's not like anyone helped me while I lived in that house either.

As Ikki sighed, Stella said something strange.

"...I heard about you. From the chairman."

"About me?"

"About how you were treated at school, even by your family."

"Wha... why's that person spreading the delicate matters of someone else's family? Sorry, it probably wasn't a pleasant story."

"That's not it. Rather, I want you to tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"How can you hope to become a knight when everyone treats you so badly?"

"...Why do you want to hear about that?"

"I-It's not like, it's definitely not like I want to know more about you! Don't get conceited! I was just wondering why a novice with such low magic power would still want to be a knight! Th-That's what I'm curious about!"

"Saying something so awful right to my face… it feels somehow refreshing."

Well, his story wasn't really worth hiding. Ikki was a little embarrassed about telling it, but if Stella wanted to know so badly, he couldn't reject her.

"There's a person I'm trying to reach."

"A person? Do you mean Samurai Ryouma?"

A well-known hero, who anyone of the Kurogane family would emulate—Ikki thought it natural for that name to come up.

"Yeah, exactly so. I've never had talent, so my parents and relatives have spurned me since I was young. Mine's a lineage of heroes stretching back generations, where talentless children are a burden. I wasn't allowed to participate in my family's magic lessons. Instead of a seat at New Year's parties, I was locked up out of sight every time."

「You can't do anything, so don't try.」

On his fifth birthday, those were the last words Ikki's own father ever uttered to him, and after that never spoke or turned a gaze to him again. Since the views of the family head shaped the whole household, Ikki Kurogane was treated as "one who didn't exist" by everyone else too.

It was painful enough that he honestly wanted to disappear.

"But at that time, Ryouma-san spoke to me."

Even now, Ikki Kurogane could clearly remember that snowy day. It was New Year's and the whole family was gathered, but the holiday meant nothing to Ikki. Hearing cheerful laughter despite being locked away made staying in the house painful, so he sneaked out to the mountain behind the family mansion.

And… he lost his way. The sun soon set and the air grew cold. Gentle snowfall turned into a blizzard.

No one came to find him. The reason was obvious: who'd help a child that didn't exist anyway? Even if Ikki froze to death, neither his parents nor his relatives would grieve.

In this family, only his sister would be hurt if he died… but she was just one person.

As he thought that, he couldn't help but cry. Not because he had no talent, but because no one ever believed in him.

…It was then that Ryouma Kurogane, an elderly man with large build and white imperial moustache, appeared before Ikki. He said to the crying Ikki—that Ikki should cherish those tears.

Those tears were proof that Ikki hadn't given up on himself.

「Listen boy. You're still a brat now. When you grow up, don't become a boring adult like that lot who glorify something as pointless as talent. Don't become a feeble adult who gives up without trying and calls it maturity. Become an adult who walks so far ahead they can't even trace your footsteps. A man can reach any goal if he doesn't give up. After all, mankind once flew to the moon despite not having wings.」

The old man said those words to him with a youthful smile, and brushed off the snow that had settled on Ikki's head.

"I was… overjoyed. It was the first time someone told me I didn't have to give up on myself. Though I was a child, I knew that those were simply words, and that he wouldn't guarantee anything about my future."

But still, he was happy. Even if they were just a few words, he felt truly saved.

"So I decided right then. If I have to grow up, I'll grow up to be like him. And if I ever met someone in the same situation, then unlike my parents, I'd say 'You don't have to give up', and point out that people aren't just their talents. I'll be an adult who carries that man's words to others. I'm still not good enough to do it right now, though. I have to be stronger, as strong as he was, or my words are nothing more than platitudes from the weak. That's why I can't simply yield in a place like this. If I want to be as strong as Ryouma Kurogane, then winning in the Sword-Art Festival is the least I must do."

"…I see. So that's Ikki's dream."

"You think it's hopeless?"

Bull's-eye. Stella's expression clouded awkwardly. She really thought Ikki's dream was wonderful, but… to attain it—

"You don't have to say it, or make that face either. I know it's not something I can do easily. But even so—Stella-san, if you had a dream you just can't abandon, and if someone told you 'It's impossible for you, just give up', then… would you meekly agree?"

"Ah—"

Stella's eyes opened wide. Her scarlet pupils shined bright, as if finally understanding something. As if accepting something.

"Hehe, hahaha."

Stella's apologetic look vanished and she burst out in laughter.

"Yes, that's right. I wouldn't give up. Even if I'm burnt badly, why should I give up?"

After hearing Ikki's words, Stella remembered that she was the same years ago.

"So that's the reason. It's true, we don't need to worry over reaching our dreams. If my efforts are useless even after I've given my all, then that's that, but we can't decide they're useless before we even try."

"Exactly. No matter how much I lack talent, and how many people say I'm hopeless, I won't give up on myself because of that. Especially since I hate to lose."

"Though I didn't think there was someone else who hated to lose as much as I do."

Saying that, Stella started to laugh again. It was a laughter that sounded very surprised, but very happy.

She relaxed and raised her hands.

"...Ahh, I lost. I put you on my own silly scale of prodigy and mediocrity, and didn't see the real you. It was impossible for me to win with these presumptuous, half-hearted feelings in the first place. It's my complete defeat, Ikki."

In speaking those words, Stella felt somewhat liberated. She had no more doubts about Kurono's advice. Ikki was a person who shared the same spirit, and he was stronger—that was exactly why she could learn from him, and if she followed him she'd surely become stronger herself. With honest conviction, from the bottom of her heart, Stella was thankful for meeting Ikki. How could she not be, when she crossed the world for this?

And Ikki, after seeing her bright expression, felt that Stella had come to understand him. She seemed satisfied with his replies. In that case—

"Then, since we've reached an agreement here—shall we discuss that other important matter?"

"Huh? Which one?"

"Well, I mean... I won the duel, right?"

"Of course. Even though I hate to lose, I'm not so unreasonably stubborn that I'll deny it when it happens."

"Then that means Stella-san is my slave from now on, right?"

"...Eh?"

Stella's eyes suddenly grew big, like a dove shot with a pellet.

"Don't you remember we made a bet? Whoever loses will submit to the winner, and obey any kind of order."

Instantly, Stella's complexion went boiling red, then paled to bluish white. It seemed she completely forgot about the deal because so many things had happened.

"So since I won, let's get started right away—"

"Wh, th-th-that was, that! A fi-figure of wo-wo-words, and, like, I just got too excited, and…!"

"Hmm, I wonder what I'll demand first. You'll listen to anything, right?"

"A-A-Anything!? N-No, th-that's, th-th-that's, I did say I'll do anything, but anything's not alright! Totally not alright, right!?"

Stella dove into a corner of her bed and covered herself with blankets, as if trying to hide from Ikki. What did she say about not being unreasonably stubborn?

"Eh? Then Stella-san, you're going back on your word?"

"Ugh…."

"Well, if you're that unwilling, it's okay. Ahh, I guess Vermillion's imperial family can't keep its promises?"

"Aa, ugh…."

"It's a bit disappointing."

"Wa-Wait a minute!"

As expected, Stella reacted to Ikki's shameless taunting. Creeping out of the blankets, she glared at Ikki with half-crying eyes.

"Who says we can't keep them!? Fi-Fine! I'll become your slave or dog! I'll do whatever you want! I'll do indecent things too! You pervert! Idiot! I hate you!"

"You came up with this and now you're mad about it!?"

…Well, maybe I was a bit too mean.

Ikki wanted to chastise Stella for speaking carelessly and betting herself so easily, but he seemed to have overdone it. From the beginning, he never intended to make Stella his slave. His real request was—

"Then here's an order. Stella-san, be my roommate."

—for them to live in this room together.

"Eh… that's… that's all?"

"Yeah. I was thinking while we fought that we might be able to have a peaceful relationship, and I wanted to become friends with Stella-san too. Rather than an order, it's more like a wish."

Ikki wanted to know more, and more deeply, about this girl whose spirit resembled his own. At his words—

"Fuah…."

—the girl who was thinking the exact same thing felt her brain boil over.

"Y-You, ju-just… just what are you… calling me pretty… and that you want to be friends… to an unmarried princess like it's nothing. Really, you really have no delicacy at all…."

Maybe she couldn't look up straight at Ikki anymore. Even her ears were dyed red as she averted her gaze. On the other hand, Ikki took that reaction as anger.

"Ah, th-then you don't want to? Making you live together with a boy, sorry for saying something so rude. Let's go find the chairman. If we beg, I think she can manage at least another room—"

"Wait!"

Stella grabbed Ikki as he was about to leave.

"…It's fine."

"Eh?"

"I-I said… I don't mind it!"

"Eh? It's really okay?"

"I-I'll tell you this, but it's only because it's an order! I'll be troubled if you think Vermillion royalty are liars. That's all, I say! I-It's not like I-I'm doing this because I want to be friends with you even this much!"

Stella stood up after throwing glances all over the place. She really expressed it in a roundabout way… but Ikki understood that she was consenting. That made him very happy.

"Then let's get along from now on, Stella-san."

"…It can't be helped, so I'll be in your care… hmph!"

Stella shook his hand while looking the other way. Her hand was far smaller than he had imagined, and far warmer.

Just as they finally worked out the roommate issue, the dormitory bell rang. It was the signal for eight o'clock.

"Ugh, it seems like I slept quite a bit. Guess it's too late now."

"Is there something inconvenient about eight o'clock?"

"The dining halls here close at eight. What am I going to do about dinner?"

The curfew is at nine. I guess I should go to the supermarket and buy something. But my body hurts after using Ittou Shura, so I really don't want to cook….

It was scary to think what would happen if he sliced off a finger. Ikki folded his arms in worry, but Stella proposed a solution with a strangely excited voice.

"I-If that's all, then I'll make something."

"Eh? Is that okay?"

"I mean, Ikki is… my ma-master though I'm very reluctant about it… and it's a maid's duty to cook when the master wants a meal."

"…Erm, can't we just forget all the talk about being master and slave?"

"Th-That's no good! Royalty never break a promise! S-So stop being reluctant and let me serve you!"

What an outrageously great maid she was. And to be honest, Ikki was at that age when a girl's homemade cooking was rather appealing.

"I understand. Then let's go to the nearby supermarket together. I'll at least do the buying, Stella-san."

"Mu—"

…Huh? Why's she pouting this time?

"…That's not allowed."

"That, being?"

"That 'Stella-san' thing. Ikki is the master here, and on top of that you're older, so it's weird for you to add an honorific. Say it without the '-san'."

"Err… I shouldn't. I mean, Stella-san is really a princess…."

"And who is it that wants to be friends with this princess?"

"Uh…."

"Isn't it weird for friends to be so formal?"

Well, that's indeed the case, but—

"Isn't it weirder for friends to be master and slave?"

"This is one issue, that is another."

"Eeeeehhh!?"

"In any case!"

Stella pointed a finger, **stab!**, at the tip of Ikki's nose.

"I won't reply if you don't call me Stella."

She declared it in an adorably angry way, but at the same time she sounded quite embarrassed. Ikki didn't want to address a princess in an unfitting manner… but it was true they should become friends, so refusing her now would be bad too.

"…Heh. I get it, Stella."

In the end, Ikki gave in. Or rather, Stella had been leading him through the conversation for a while now. What an outrageously great maid she was!

"Yeah. Then let's go, Ikki! I still don't know much about Japan, so be sure to escort me properly."

"Yes, yes."

But even though he called her name with no formality at all, if it made her so happy, he'd have to speak this way from now on. Captivated by Stella's smile, Ikki arrived at that conclusion with a grin of his own.

References

1. ↑ Tokyo Dome has an area of 112,456 square meters.
2. ↑ The Heisei period, which started in 1989, is the current era according to Japan's era naming system. Harakiri as an official punishment was abolished during the Meiji period, in 1873.
3. ↑ *Lævateinn*: A weapon, possibly a sword or staff, mentioned in Norse mythology's Poetic Eddas. In popular culture, it is associated with fire. This uses the kanji 妃竜の罪剣, *Hiryuu no Zaiken* ("Empress Dragon's Sin Blade").
4. ↑ *Intetsu*, 陰鉄: "Shadow Iron"
5. ↑ *Dragon Breath*: This uses the kanji 妃竜の息吹, *Hiryuu no Sokusui* ("Empress Dragon's Breath").
6. ↑ *Imperial Arts*: This uses the kanji 皇室剣術, *Koushitsu Kenjutsu* ("Imperial Sword Technique").
7. ↑ *Blade Steal*: This uses the kanji 模倣剣技, *Muhou Kenjutsu* ("Imitation Sword Technique").
8. ↑ *Katharterio Salamandra*: "Salamander of Purgatory", in Greek. This uses the kanji 天壌焼き焦がす竜王の焔, *Tenjou Yakikogasu Ryuu-Ou no Honoo* ("Heaven-and-Earth-Searing Dragon King's Flame").
9. ↑ *Shura*: A low-ranking Buddhist deity or demigod. They are more powerful than humans, but are chained to the cycle of rebirth by great egotistical passions, especially envy.
10. ↑ *Ittou Shura*, 一刀修羅: "One-Blade Shura"

Chapter 2: Visitor from that Former Home

Part 1

On an early morning in still-chilly April, two figures stood outside Hagun Academy. One was Ikki Kurogane; he was wearing a jersey and standing in front of the main gate, sipping from a sports drink bottle while moving his shoulders up and down lightly. The other was Stella Vermillion; she was quite a distance away and panting from fatigue, running towards the main gate.

Ikki had no magic talent so he set intense training routines for himself, and ran about twenty kilometers every morning to maintain his physical fitness. Those twenty kilometers weren't some light jogging; he sprinted at full speed and changed the rhythm often to strain his heart and lungs. Stella, who had become his roommate three days ago, also joined him in this daily routine.

On the first day, Stella collapsed along the road. On the second, she threw up. Because of that, Ikki started to match his pace for today, the third day.

"Didn't I say not to mind me!?"

But when he dropped his speed, Stella shouted at Ikki with an intensity he hadn't seen before, so he ran as usual today too. And today, though there was quite a delay, she made sure to reach him.

…As I thought, Stella really is amazing.

As she staggered to the gate, Ikki admired Stella's figure. She possessed great talent in magic, but also trained herself physically. He had to acknowledge that she continued to improve without relying solely on her talent.

"Haa, haaaa—! Goooaaal...."

"Well done."

"I-I'm fine... th-this much is—"

She was so exhausted that her clothes were damp with sweat. That was some amazing willpower. Ikki watched Stella breathe heavily, and offered her the beverage he had just been consuming.

"Here, want some?"

Stella stared at the bottle with a bewildered expression.

"Eh, that's... indirect kiss...."

"What's wrong? ...Oh, sorry. You can't take a bottle that a boy used."

"I-I didn't say anything was wrong with it! Just the opposite!"

"Opposite?"

"N-N-Nothing, you idiot! Give it to me!"

Ah, of all places, she drank from where I put my mouth.

Stella took the bottle with her face even redder than running had made it, and Ikki wasn't fast enough pointing that out. Feeling apologetic, he ducked away from Stella's gaze to look at Hagun Academy's main gate, where there was a signboard indicating the upcoming school formalities.

"The opening ceremony, finally."

It would be deeply personal for Ikki. Last year had passed him by, but this year was different because Kurono Shinguuji, the new board chairman, was giving all students the chance to learn. He could feel his anticipation rising. And also—

"You look pretty happy, Ikki."

"Do I? Actually, there's someone I want to meet."

"...I don't suppose you're talking about a girl?"

Huh? I feel killing intent.

"Umm, it's true she's a girl, but—"

"Farewell."

"Wait, wait! Put down Lævateinn and listen to the rest! I'm talking about my little sister!"

"Sister? Come to think of it, you said something about a sister during the duel."

"Yeah. She's entering as a first-year. I haven't contacted her after running away from home, so I'm kinda happy to see her after so long."

She was a girl with silver twin-tails, always following Ikki around with small unsteady steps. She was a spoiled and lonely cry-baby, but also his cute little sister who hadn't scorned him when his brother, mother, father, and relatives all did. For Ikki, Shizuku Kurogane was his only family. How much had she grown in four years?

"I'm looking forward to it."

"I have one question about that sister. You're sure she's actually connected by blood, right?"

"Oh, she's just a normal blood-related sibling you'd find in any family. Why?"

"Then I'll forgive you."

Why was he being forgiven? Ikki didn't quite get it, but his policy was to avoid things he couldn't understand. Ikki looked at the signboard again and thought about the days to come. The fights that decided the right to perform at the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival that were about to begin.

Part 2

"Okay☆! To all the new students, congratulations on getting in—♥!"

Bang! Standing on the platform in front of the students, a young teacher greeted everyone with a shot of confetti and a big smile.

"I'm Yuuri Oreki, the person in charge of Year One Class One. It's my first time teaching homeroom, so I'd be very happy if you call me Yuuri-chan☆ and treat me as a friend—♪"

Their school days were starting quite lightheartedly. Stella, sitting in a neighboring desk as if linked to Ikki by fate, grumbled at Oreki's manic enthusiasm.

"…She seems exhausting."

"Haha, that's true, but she's a good teacher."

"You know her?"

"Well, a little bit."

Ikki smiled, and turned his attention back to the teacher's speech.

"Since today's the first day, there aren't any lessons! But I do have something to share about the representative selection battles for the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival. Everyone, can you take out your student datapads?"

As instructed, Ikki took out a palm-sized liquid crystal terminal from his breast pocket. The Hagun Academy student pad was an all-in-one tool that could be used as ID, wallet, cell-phone, internet terminal, and much more.

"Okay, like Miss Director said in the opening ceremony, Hagun Academy was using an attribute score system to select the Festival representative up until last year, right? But from this year forward, selection by attribute scores has been abolished! The system was changed to a tournament with the whole school participating, and six people will be chosen based on results from actual battles! Wow, violence! The selection battle executive committee will send messages to your datapads, so you should come to the designated place when the dates and times are confirmed, okay? It's a loss by default if you don't come, so be careful—♥"

Stella suddenly raised her hand.

"Sensei[1]."

"*Non non*. If you don't call me Yuuri-chan☆ then I won't reply."

"…Yu-Yuuri-chan."

"Yay! What is it, Stella-chan?"

"How many matches will these selection battles involve?"

"I'm not sure, but each student should go through roughly ten matches or more. After the matches start, you'll definitely have one match every three days, so be ready—♪"

Ikki felt a bit relieved after hearing that, since Ittou Shura's once-a-day limit made consecutive battles quite severe. But while this arrangement was good for Ikki, it was much less convenient for his fellow students.

"Hey, you can't be serious."

"Too troublesome~. Then I won't be able to go out!"

"I don't really want to participate in the Festival anyway."

Displeased voices sounded across the classroom, but of course not everyone was as interested in the Sword-Art Festival as Ikki. For one thing, illusionary forms weren't used there, making the fights dangerous. Some people didn't want to risk injury just to raise their rankings. Graduating peacefully and acquiring mage-knight qualification, finding a high-salary job and attending to it with normal diligence—there were many students who sought that straight a path.

One of those students spoke up.

"Are there any penalties for losing or abstaining?"

"Nope~♪ There's no penalty, and no black marks on your grades either, but there are bonuses if you win~☆ And of course, you can also abstain, and people who aren't interested in joining the Festival should write the executive committee a mail saying they won't participate. You'll be removed from the roster immediately. But you know…."

Oreki looked at Ikki's direction for a moment, and smiled gently.

"Even if it might be very tough, I still think this is a wonderful system that gives each of you an equal chance to win the Sword-Art Festival and become a Seven Stars Sword King. That's why I want you all to participate ambitiously if you can. I'm sure everyone will treasure the experience."

Ikki nodded gratefully at the gaze aimed towards him. He knew Oreki from when she was his entrance examiner, and he was now attending Hagun because she evaluated Ikki properly.

As his mind wandered toward that event from a year ago, he recalled something.

Wait, doesn't Oreki-sensei—

"So everyone, please do your best from now on! LET'S ALL **ABUUAAABUFUUU!!!**"

—have an extremely weak body? But by the time he remembered it, Oreki was already vomiting blood onto the floor.

"Yu-Yuuri-chaaaaan!?"

His classmates screamed at the bright red explosion from the teacher's mouth, and Ikki jumped from his seat to support Oreki.

"Ah, she's okay, she's okay. Everyone please calm down. You don't have to worry so much. Oreki-sensei is just very unhealthy."

"No, that's worrying too! How can there be so much blood!?"

Coughing violently, Oreki showed her distressed students a fragile smile.

"Oh, I'm quite fine, as Kurogane-kun said. Your teacher… has been spewing a liter of blood each day since she was a child…."

"What's fine about that!?"

"…Well, I've been living with this body for over twenty years. It'll be fine again in a week. Haha… amazing, isn't it?"

Ikki sighed.

"Please don't be proud of something so sad. Erm, I'll take her to the nurse for now, so why don't you guys clean up the pool of blood over here?"

"Gotcha. Leave that to us!"

After seeing a peach-blonde girl nod, Ikki leaned Oreki on his shoulder and headed towards the infirmary.

On the way, he asked his teacher about something that had been worrying him for a while.

"Oreki-sensei, you seem to be in quite the mood today. Was that to welcome the incoming students?"

Cough cough "…Yes, it's the opening day after all… so to congratulate everyone and fire up their spirit, I pushed myself."

So that was why, as he thought. It was something his gentle teacher would do.

"Oreki-sensei, there's something important I'd like to say."

"What is it?"

"I think you ended up disturbing them instead."

"Urgh…."

It was harsh, but it was for her own good. People had to act their age.

Part 3

"Sensei says we can just go home today."

The first homeroom of the year ended with Ikki delivering that message.

Guess I'll go look for Shizuku? I shouldn't remain here much longer anyway.

He had been feeling confused gazes since the class started, from people wondering how to deal with him. Oreki had collapsed before the students could share introductions, but no doubt they already knew he was repeating this grade level.

Maybe I acted more openly than I should've.

Minding his classmates' feelings, Ikki turned to leave, but—

"Senpai[2]!"

"Whoa!"

—one of his female classmates grabbed onto him. It caught Stella's attention immediately.

"Wha—!? W-Wait a minute! What's going on here, Ikki!"

"That's what I want to know! H-Hey, what are you doing so suddenly?"

"Ah, when I realized I finally had a chance to speak to Senpai properly, I got too excited and… please excuse me."

The cute peach-blonde girl apologizing to him was the same girl who had agreed to clean up. Licking her lips cutely, she separated from Ikki.

"I'm Kagami Kusakabe. I'm a huuuuge fan of yours~!"

"Fan?"

The world held Blazers in high regard, and mage-knights were always at the center of attention. This included student knights, and there were even those like Stella who the media watched with interest. In addition, the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival, the highest battle for students, was broadcast all over the country via the Net. It wasn't rare for students to enroll into the academy after becoming a fan of one of those celebrities.

But… that had nothing to do with Ikki, so he tilted his head in confusion after hearing this response.

"I don't think I've done anything to deserve fans. Maybe you're confusing me with someone else?"

"Oh please, Senpai! Trying to play dumb, you~. I'm talking about this, you know?"

Ikki wasn't trying to play dumb, but when he saw the datapad Kagami presented, his tongue got stuck in his throat. Stella, who was also looking at the display, cried out in surprise.

"Hey, isn't that our duel!?"

"Could it be that Senpai and Stella-chan actually didn't know? Neither of you look on the Net at all?"

"Yeah, I'm not good with machines and stuff."

"I don't keep up with that. And I don't have a computer either."

"Huh, oh well. This was uploaded to a video sharing site immediately after you two finished your duel. It caused quite a stir. Everyone knows about it, right?"

All the classmates who were listening to their conversation nodded.

"Yep, I saw that video."

"And a ton of articles got posted. Shouldn't most people know of it?"

"I saw it too. I wanted to ask about a lot of things, but you're a year older, so it was hard to speak out. Hahaha...."

So that's the real reason for the gazes I felt before?

"Ah... I'm sorry for troubling you. But it's okay to talk to me normally, since we're classmates and all."

"Really!?"

All the girls in the class approached him instantly.

"Thank goodness! Thank you very much, Kurogane-san!"

"I've been wanting to talk to Kurogane-san ever since I saw that match!"

"Me too! I mean, you were so cool!"

"Erm, Kurogane-senpai. If it's not a bother, could you teach me swordsmanship? I want to be stronger like you!"

"Ah! That's unfair! I wanted to ask that!"

Ikki pleaded with the cheering girls whose eyes all glowed with affection and respect.

"W-Wait a minute. I did say it was okay to talk freely, but it's confusing if you all come at me like that."

Since Ikki spent all his leisure time training instead of interacting with the opposite sex, of course he'd be uncomfortable. Girls his age had never approached him like this, and the admiration sparkling in their eyes made it all the more embarrassing.

Kagami giggled at his expression.

"Is being popular that surprising? Senpai, you're seriously the center of attention right now. Especially from the female population, according to my data!"

"Eh? W-Why?"

"I mean, aren't you like, su~per strong? Girls who aim to be mage-knights all love strong guys. And even though you're that strong, you're called a Failed Knight. Something so mysterious sends the heart racing. But most importantly, Senpai, you have such an adorable face—"

"I-I don't really think that's true though."

"And that troubled face also pushes a girl's maternal instincts hard—"

At Kagami's words, the girls surrounding him all cheered "Right! Right!" and "Even though he's older, he's so cute!"

C-Cute? I know my face isn't too manly, but being labeled cute by girls younger than me… as a guy, that gives me complicated feelings!

Well, being liked was way better than being hated. Ikki thought that with a smile, when Kagami suddenly grabbed his right hand.

"Ka-Kagami-san!?"

After latching on, Kagami came to point-blank range and pleaded with teary eyes.

"So, Senpai. I have a big favor to ask my super popular senior. Won't you listen to your cute junior's request~?"

"W-What is it? If I can help… then I'll try to…?"

"Yay~♪ Thank you so much! Actually, I was thinking of starting a newspaper club, the Hagun High School Wall Newspaper, and I wanted to put everything about you in the first issue! The title would be… that's right, how about 『**The Menacing Ambush! The Rumored Supernova Conquered!**』, or something like that?"

She wanted to write this terrible story even with Stella standing right here? Ikki broke into a sweat and looked to his side.

"Oo~h. Isn't it great? Being so popular. That story, why not help her with it? Senpai."

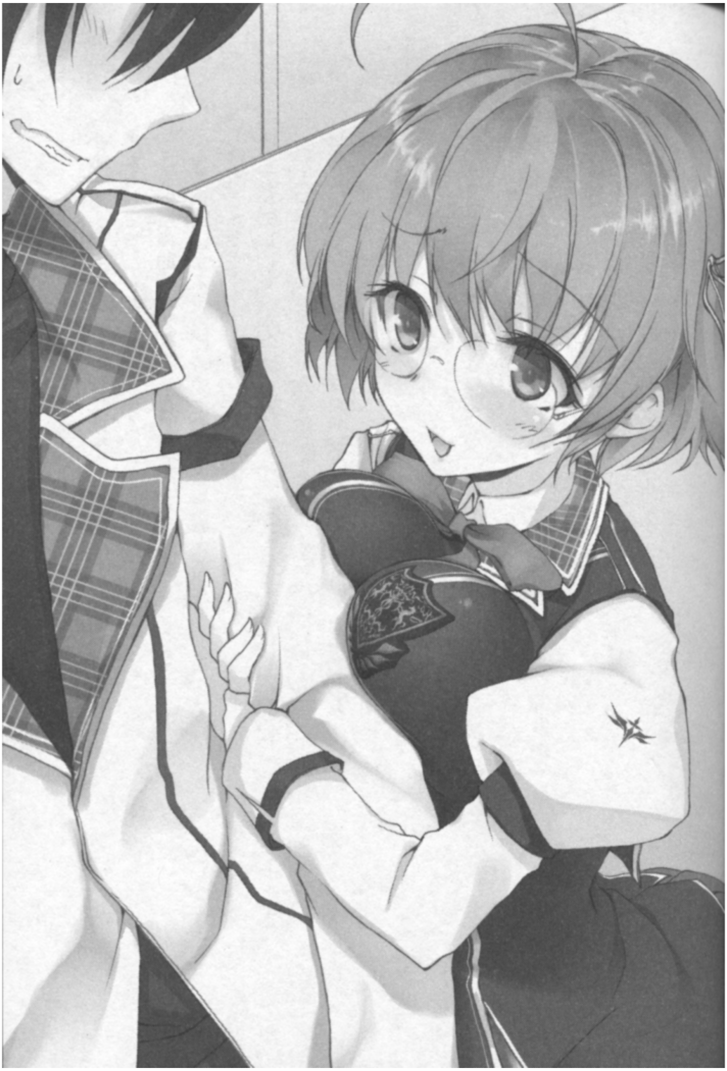
Stella had an incredibly sour expression, but of course she wouldn't be happy about her defeat becoming a news article. Ikki didn't have the courage to accept after seeing her face.

"I'm really sorry, but I'm not used to that kind of thing."

But Kagami didn't retreat one step, and grabbed Ikki's arm even more tightly.

"It's fine! I'll gently lead you through it~"

Squish She pressed Ikki's arm against her breasts, and a sweet feeling immediately ran through his body.



"Wha… erm… Kusakabe-san."

"Please don't treat me like a stranger. Kagami is fine. Isn't our relationship like that~?"

What kind of relationship do we suddenly have? Didn't we just meet?

"Kagami-san, err, let go a little. It's touching."

"Oh really? Touching? What is?"

Did Kagami not realize it? She blinked, but after realizing Ikki's arm was on her chest, she grasped the situation and revealed her deepest thoughts with an amazingly evil grin.

"No way, I won't let go until you agree to an interview~"

She pressed herself against him even harder.

"Waaah!"

"Tell me all… about… you…♡"

A sweet voice murmuring, a warm sigh brushing his ear—these were both to bait Ikki, and he knew it.

…*C-Cute!*

But Ikki was a man after all. How could he stay calm with a cute young girl approaching him so aggressively? Even though he knew she was leading him on, her assertive appeal overwhelmed him.

Stella's patience finally hit rock bottom after seeing Ikki in that state.

"Hey Ikki—!"

What was he acting so lovestruck for!? This miserable person! She tried to rebuke Ikki like that.

"Hey Senpai, we also want a chat with you."

But before she could, an insolent voice like that of a ferocious beast erupted without trying to hide its hostility.

Part 4

Five wild-eyed boys pushed through the ring of girls to stand before Ikki, and one conspicuously tall boy among them spoke with the overpowering voice from before.

"You seem to be quite popular, but don't you think flirting with all the chicks in class is going too far?"

Ikki's monopoly over the girls was apparently getting on the guy's nerves, if the vein popping on his temple was any sign. Their classmates didn't take to that attitude, though.

"What's with you, Manabe!? Are you jealous?"

"Don't start sulking just because you're not popular! You're the worst!"

Their words seemed to set off the rest of the guy's group.

"Whore, what did you just say!? Don't go spouting shit at Ma-kun!"

Manabe's followers were now threatening the girls, but if they wanted to pick a fight, Ikki thought it was best if he remained their target. He bowed before them slightly, trying to calm them down.

"If I bothered you, I'm sorry about that. Causing a racket after school certainly isn't appropriate, like you said."

"The hell is this? Are you trying to play decent, you fraud?"

"Fraud? What do you mean?"

"Even if you can trick these idiot girls, you can't trick me. There's no way an F-Rank can beat an A-Rank. That match was probably fake, to get popular like this."

"Err, I haven't tricked anyone. And you're being rude to Stella."

"So you're still saying you beat an A-Rank? That's pretty shameless. If you're so strong, then let's spar a little right now and see."

At his words, the five boys started to circle Ikki like hyenas surrounding prey, and the four with Manabe summoned their Devices. Kagami yelled out at that sight.

"Hey wait! Are you guys serious!? You'll be suspended if you use Devices here!"

"Shut up, bitch! Get back if you don't wanna get hurt."

Manabe's four followers ignored her warning and brandished their weapons. Judging from their ferocious expressions, they weren't using illusionary form. But even in this situation, Ikki held his composure and tried to control the situation.

"No, we can't do this here. As Kusakabe-san said, fighting in the classroom is against school rules. Our powers as student knights are restricted in this academy, and we're not allowed to use them outside of designated zones. If you'd like to fight, let's go somewhere else. I'll play along with you until evening in one of the practice fields."

Ikki was saying he could spar at one of the training arenas. He would accompany these boys even though they weren't worth fighting and he'd rather go find his sister. He was acting as a senior, indulging his juniors.

"You bastard…."

Yet another vein popped on Manabe's temple, because Ikki had made a blunder. What Manabe and his followers wanted wasn't to spar, but to see an F-Rank coward crawl at their feet and beg forgiveness for using deceit to make himself popular with girls. Instead, this F-Rank said he wanted to fight after switching locations? That was pure insult.

"Don't be cocky, you damn repeater! Get him, guys!"

Huh? Did I say something wrong?

It was too late to wonder. The boys could no longer be stopped from trying to cut Ikki down, and the girls screamed at the unfolding scene. This was no longer a mess he could resolve peacefully. Ikki sighed. He had to use force now.

"Senpai! I'll vouch for your legitimate self-defense, so stomp them good!"

Kagami urged him to fight and promised to absolve him if the school authorities investigated. That was a nice proposal, but—

"No, there's no need."

No need, because he wouldn't wield his Device in this scuffle.

In an instant, Ikki focused his sight. He didn't need color, so Ikki cut off that detail, and seeing the world moving in gray, he transferred the acuity of his color sense to his motion perception. As he did so, the movements of the world around him slowed. This was no special power, just the boost in cognition that even regular people would receive from danger, except that Ikki could activate it consciously since, obviously, he couldn't reach the level of concentration needed to win a fight in under a minute without this sort of ability.

The gray world around him slowed and dimmed as if sinking to the bottom of the sea, and Ikki analyzed his surroundings. There were four enemies to his left, right, front and back.

The fastest would be the one wielding a Japanese sword and coming directly from the front.

Seeing that, Ikki gently used the back of his empty right hand to hit the center of the sword, and with a completely relaxed motion, he changed the trajectory of the swing.

"Eh—?"

Surprise emerged on the face of the boy who swung the sword. His blade flew horizontally past Ikki, and at the same time, Ikki used one leg to trip him.

"Waaah!"

As he tripped, he crashed into his compatriot coming at Ikki from behind with a longsword-shaped Device, and they both tumbled crashing into some nearby desks.

Two down.

"You son of a biiiiitch!"

"Diiieeeee!"

Two boys on his left and right attacked him simultaneously with axes. They were both aiming for Ikki's head, so responding was simple.

"Hup—"

Ikki folded his knees and ducked. A second later, the clear sound of steel on steel rang above him. That was the sound of a clash between two parties giving their full strength.

"Gaaaaaaaah!"

Both boys fell screaming. The jolt of impact had completely numbed their arms.

One left.

"Sh-Shit!"

Manabe's haughtiness was nowhere to be found. He couldn't comprehend how his friends were defeated so easily, so he summoned his Device in confusion. It was a large-caliber revolver, an unusual Device for an Easterner, and he aimed the muzzle at Ikki. He could fire a magic bullet with just a squeeze of the trigger.

Ikki was already moving. He grabbed a eraser from someone's desk close by and flicked it upward with his thumb. The piece of rubber hit the ceiling, bounced down, and—wedged itself in the space between the gun's hammer and percussion cap.

Manabe raised a voiceless scream as if he saw a ghost. Ikki had disabled the gun in a totally unimaginable way.

Ikki stepped into the now defenseless Manabe's blind side, and—

Bam!

—clapped his palms together before Manabe's eyes.

"Hii—"

But that was enough. Though Ikki had only clapped once, Manabe fell down on his back and stared at Ikki with trembling eyes. And why not? Right before those eyes, an empty-handed F-Rank had defeated five Device-wielding Blazers like it was nothing. There was no way Manabe would have any fight left in him, so Ikki didn't need to give a finishing blow. No battle using Devices had happened. No combat had even occurred.

At that outcome, Ikki looked downwards with a smile that according to Kusakabe was sure to spark a girl's feminine instincts.

"Let's get along, since we're going to be classmates for a whole year."

Manabe could only nod his trembling head. The classmates around them also stood stunned after seeing Ikki disable five Blazers without injury.

"E-Eh? Stella, isn't the mood a bit too cold?"

"Naturally! What do you think happens when you show off so much power?"

"Show off? I thought I held back enough not to hurt them though."

"Isn't that exactly what everyone's so surprised about?"

Stella sighed in amazement. But at that moment—

Clap clap clap

Applause came from the classroom entrance. Everyone turned, wondering who it was, and saw a small girl standing in the hall. She had short silver hair and jade-green eyes, showing enough charm to fascinate everyone, and she wore a light smile on her flower bud-like pink lips.

"Overwhelming strength that never lets weaklings approach. That's just like you, Onii-sama[3]."

Her refined voice resounded like song.

Onii-sama. At that word, Ikki's eyes widened.

"You can't be…."

No, he didn't need to ask. The tone, features, hairstyle, and everything else about her had changed so much, but only one person in the world called him so. She was the sole resident of the vast Kurogane estate who put him at ease, his one and only little sister that followed him around with small steps.

"Shizu…ku?"

"Yes. It's been so long, Onii-sama."

Part 5

"Shizuku!"

Ikki rushed over to his sister and took her hands.

"Wow, it's really you! You've grown up so much, I didn't recognize you!"

"Of course, since we haven't met in four years. It would be more odd if I didn't change."

"Ahaha, that's true. But still, I'm so happy! To think that Shizuku would come for me! I was going to look for you myself, but I had a bit of trouble in class and—no, that doesn't even matter, right? Sorry, I'm getting too excited."

He wanted to say many things, to apologize for suddenly leaving home, to share his joy in this reunion. But all those things tried to leave his mouth together, so he couldn't speak properly. It was quite troubling.

"Hey Ikki. Could she be the sister you mentioned this morning?"

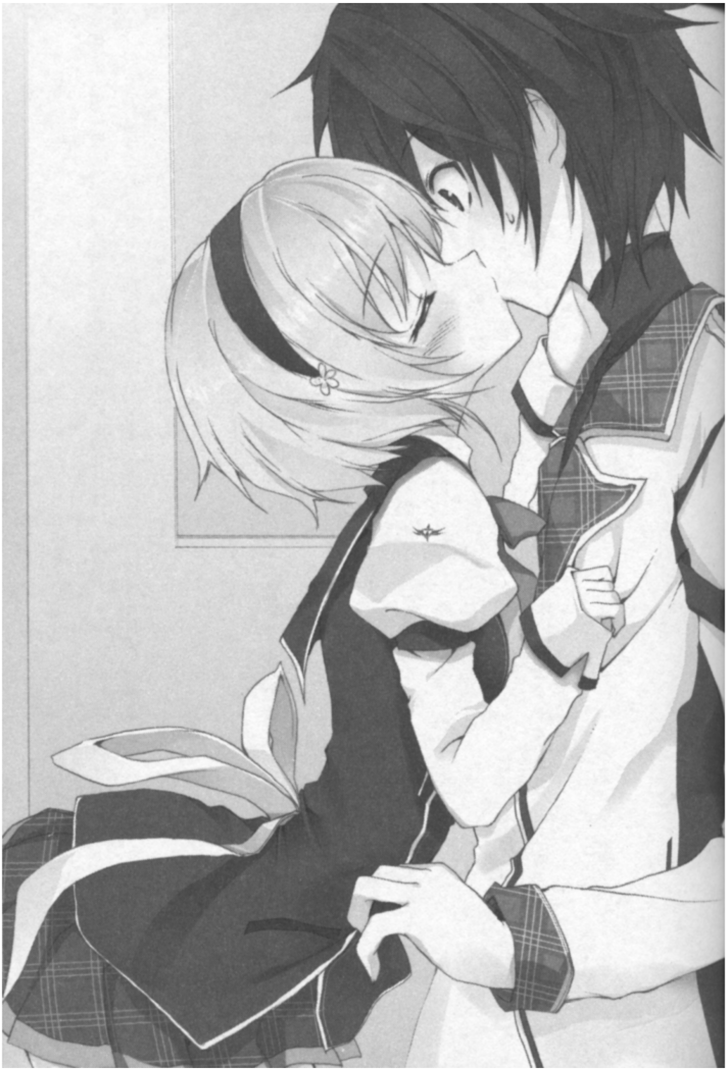
Stella's question was a lifesaver, giving Ikki a chance to pull himself together.

"Eh? Ah! Yes! Stella, I'll introduce her to all of you—"

But when Ikki turned to the class, Shizuku grabbed his sleeve to draw his gaze back, and pulled him closer.

"Onii-sama… I've wanted to see you so much…."

Touching Ikki's cheeks, Shizuku kissed him with pale pink lips.



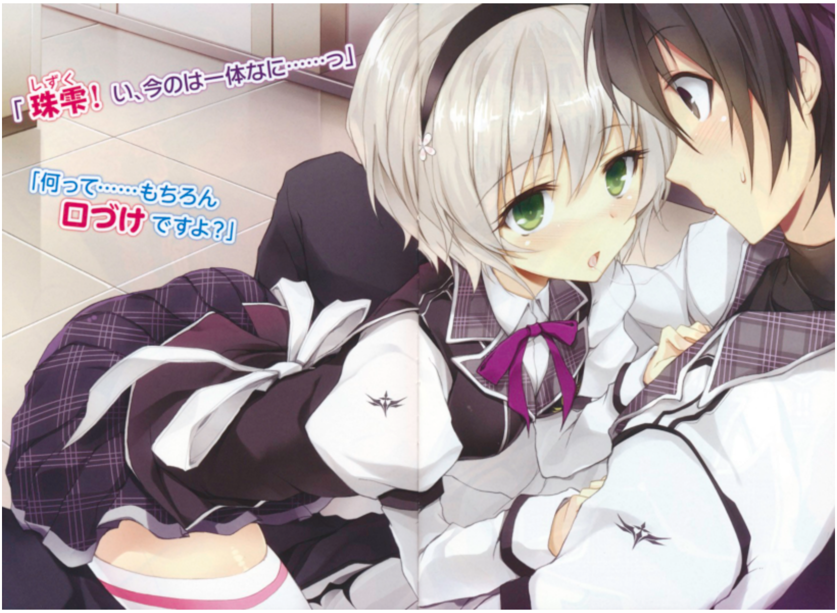
At this heedlessly public kiss, the rest of the class screamed.

"WHAT THE HELL—!?"

"W-Wait a minute! Ikki! Y-Y-You! What do you think you're doing!?"

Of course, Ikki was the one most confused about getting kissed by his little sister. He quickly removed Shizuku's hands from his jacket.

"I-I-I don't know what happened either! Shizuku! Just now, what did you…!?"


「珠雫（しずく）! い、今のは一体なに……っ」
「何って……もちろん口づけですよ?」

"What? …It was a kiss, you know?"

"I know that! I'm surprised because I'm totally clear about that! But why did you kiss me!?"

"Does there need to be a reason? A kiss is proof of deep love, something done even by people sharing the shallow, fickle, and crude bond of romantic love, so isn't it natural for siblings of the same blood to kiss? Rather, it's odd for them not to. Besides, kissing is simply a greeting in other countries."

"Eh? Is that true? Stella, am I the weird one here?"

"Of course not! Why are you following her pace!? First of all, mouth-to-mouth is an inexcusable greeting even in other countries! Is Japan a nation where siblings kiss!?"

Their classmates recoiled at Stella's question and began to mutter among themselves.

「No, that's definitely wrong.」

「Totally impossible.」

「I'd throw up just thinking about it.」

"Oh, then Shizuku, you're the one who's weird. The voters were unanimous."

Shizuku laughed softly at that.

"There's no problem at all, Onii-sama, because they are them, and we are us. I'm sure the sibling bonds of everyone else here are as cold as tundra. Our modern era is sick like that. But you and I are different. Such a kiss can't even express the love I've felt for four long years. Even if we have sex right here, it'd be no more than a greeting."

"LIKE HELL THAT'S POSSIBLE!!!"

It was only the first period of the first day of school, but Year One Class One found themselves already unified in mind and spirit.

"No, Shizuku, what are you saying!? For a young lady to say s-sex so easily, how is that decent!?"

"It's a joke. You're so cute, blushing like that."

Who… who was this!? Shizuku's enchanting smile made Ikki break into a cold sweat. The sister in his memories was terribly shy and scared of crowds. How in the world did she turn out this way?

"Well then, Onii-sama, let's put those trivial things aside. Please feel more of me, and let me feel more of you too."

Shizuku said that, and her arms wrapped around Ikki's neck like white serpents. Her jade eyes, having not fallen on anyone else since she entered the classroom, shined at Ikki like those of a bird of prey.

"These four years, I've been so lonely…."

"Wa…ah!"

Her pink lips came near for a second kiss. This was bad. Going any farther was bad. This was no healthy relationship for siblings. But even though Ikki knew that, he couldn't move. His sister had locked her green eyes onto him and wouldn't let him flee, so the two of them once again—

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!"

But Stella ripped Ikki out of that dangerous position.

"Hey Ikki! Why aren't you stopping her!? Get a hold of yourself!"

"S-Sorry! I mean, thanks for saving me Stella!"

For the first time, Shizuku looked at someone other than Ikki, as if she had just now noticed the other girl's presence.

"What are you doing?"

"That's my line! What are you up to!? Why were you getting close to Ikki!?"

"What? I was going to kiss him."

"Th-That's right! Why on earth would you do that!?"

"Why? Well if I have to answer, then—"

Shizuku sighed at Stella's question.

"—I do with my brother whatever I like."

"Ikki! Your sister is strange! What part of her is 'a normal blood-related sibling'!?"

"No, I'm surprised too!"

"You've interrupted us more than once now. You're that rumored Princess Stella, right? Why is royalty intruding on a conversation between commoners?"

"Can commoners stand such an obscene conversation either!?"

"As I said, they are them and we are us."

"You're just glossing over the issue! Think with common sense for a moment!"

"...What a noisy person. Fine, even if—let's pretend if—it's odd for a sister to kiss her brother, and I've done something contrary to common sense... why does it matter to you?"

"Err...."

"This issue is between him and me. A small-minded princess who's not involved in our affairs should stay away."

Shizuku said that with a half-lidded gaze, and Stella winced. This little sister's resolve came from a great longing for her brother Ikki after four years of separation. Stella certainly had no direct connection, and she shouldn't be pricking at their reunion from the sidelines, but—

"Onii-sama, there seems to be a hindrance here, so let's go somewhere quieter and reclaim the years we lost."

—but this wench wasn't acting like a little sister. She was speaking to Ikki in a manner that crosses beyond right-minded blood relations, and Stella couldn't leave that kind of person alone with Ikki.

So Stella braced herself.

"...If it's a connection you need, then I have one."

Her face was dyed red as she said it.

"We have a relationship, so him kissing you, I can't allow that!"

"Eh!?"

Those words shocked Ikki, because Stella had just declared it wasn't okay for him to kiss another girl.

Does that... by any chance... mean that Stella, towards me—

"Because Ikki is my master! If my master turns into an perverted sis-con[4] and gets thrown out of society, it would obviously bother me!"

"That's your reason—!?"

"Super huge scandal—! I can finally see the first issue, 『**Squirm on My Chest! Princess and Savage Locked in Room Almost 72 Hours!**』 It'll definitely be that!"

「Kurogane seemed mature, but he's even into...?」

「Wow, maybe he's hiding really strong appetites?」

「Making a princess your servant? That's some high level degradation play.」

Th-This is bad. Stella just turned everything in a ridiculous direction.

"W-Wait a minute, Stella! What are you saying in front of all these people!?"

"B-But isn't it true!? We fought that duel while betting our all, and I lost to you. Which means, even though I'm unwilling, that my body and heart belong to you! You could even say we're one in body and soul. There's no way I'm not part of your affairs! And keeping one's lord on the right path is a vassal's duty!"

"Didn't I say we should just forget about that promise!?"

"No! My royal pride won't allow it, and haven't you already given this princess the order to 'Live together with me'!?"

"I don't remember it sounding that smooth! And I wasn't implying anything immoral either!"

"But what you said wasn't very different!"

Which he couldn't argue, but….

"Is that true?"

An ice-cold voice struck Ikki's back, and it sent a chill cutting through Ikki body as if water had been poured into his veins. The charm Shizuku had been showing was nowhere to be seen. Her cold voice resounded again.

"Is it true?"

Shizuku stood there staring at Ikki, her face as stiff a Noh mask.

Scary!

"Onii-sama. I'm asking whether that was true or not."

What a heavy question. He wanted to deny it. If he didn't deny it, something bad was going to happen. Ikki knew that, but unfortunately it was almost exactly as Stella said, so—

"W-Well, I think some spiteful nuance was added, but… it's like she said."

The honest Ikki couldn't help but give that answer, even if honest people didn't live long.

"Oh, so it's true? Fu… fufufu… fufu—hii!"

"Shizuku…?"

"Liar."

Shizuku smiled with narrowed eyes, and fear—as if someone was licking his spinal cord—raced through Ikki's body.

"Why would you tell such a lie, Onii-sama? There's no way you'd do that. You'd never make me sad, never say something that could hurt me. That's not—"

"E-Erm, Shizuku…-san?"

"—you at all. Ah! I understand. I'm sure this woman is blackmailing you to go out with her. And you're covering that fact so you won't make me worry, right? Yes, what else could—"

"Wait, just listen to me for a—"

"—it be? Poor Onii-sama. What a horrible woman. This is exactly why I didn't want you to leave home. You're so amazing and fascinating, why else would lewd and stupid people—"

"Shizuku, I'm begging you to calm down a bit and we'll talk this over—"

"—who only have large breasts come near you? You're not to blame. You're just captivating and dreamy. So it's all this woman's fault. It's all this woman's fault. That's why I'll set you free. Splash away, *Yoishigure*[5]!"

"H-Hey Shizuku, that's bad! You can't do that! Put that dangerous thing away and listen to me! I'm not actually being blackmailed—hey, are you listening!?"

Ikki could only stand there with a blanched face as Shizuku summoned her kodachi-shaped[6] Device, *Yoishigure*.

"Oh please, Onii-sama. I am listening. How can Shizuku not hear something Onii-sama said? That's more impossible than the world spinning backward. I might be the runner-up among the first-years and a B-Rank inferior to Stella-san, but my element is water, the natural counter to her fire. Still, I'm thankful for your worry. I love you, Onii-sama."

"You're obviously not listening at all! You've been talking nonsense since the beginning!"

"Serve me, *Lævateinn.*"

"Wha!? Why is Stella getting aggressive too!?"

"Sorry, but unlike you, I'm not so soft I'd hold back while someone points a Device at me. If she wants to fight, then I'm ready and willing."

By the time Ikki realized it, neither Shizuku nor Stella were looking at him any longer. Only the enemy was reflected in those jade and ruby eyes. He could no longer stop them with words, now that they were set on beating each other.

"Okaaay! Everyone, please go out to the hall. If you stay here you'll die, you know~!"

Kagami had already started the evacuation, showing the great adaptability of a journalist. Soon, the only other people remaining in the classroom were the two girls glaring at each other.

"But still, you have such a modest Device... just like your chest."

"And you, a weapon with no elegance at all, just like your vulgar breasts. Both are only uselessly large. They fit you well."

"Someone so deprived can't help but speak her bias, but I shall forgive it, since I'm a woman whose heart is as big as her chest."

"...Fatty."

Snap

Ikki heard an unpleasant sound from Stella's direction.

Ahh, it's hopeless.

Ikki left the room with his shoulders slumped, and the unavoidable tragedy began.

"I'll kill you!"

Those two Blazers turned Year One Class One to rubble.

Part 6

Needless to say, having a classroom destroyed was a catastrophe. The teachers conferred, and decided the punishment for the two culprits: one week of house arrest—and so the top two incoming first-years were both suspended on their first day of school. This scandal became the inaugural story for Kagami's wall newspaper and spread through the student body like wildfire.

Well, Ikki was happy to be spared the 『**Squirm on My Chest! Princess and Savage Locked in Room Almost 72 Hours!**』 story, but—

"…She really wasn't like that before."

He was shocked about many things, and he didn't stop sighing even after returning to his room that night. Shizuku really had been a sheltered, severely shy little girl. She always followed Ikki with light footsteps, and hid whenever something embarrassing happened—a truly obedient child. How did she turn into such a wickedly alluring teen?

Stella, now under house arrest, complained beside him with a displeased voice.

"Maybe not, but you sure looked happy about it. Weren't you actually delighted?"

"That's not true."

"Yes it is. If I hadn't stopped her, you would've been kissed twice."

"Ugh."

If not for Stella, he certainly would've been kissed a second time.

"B-But it wasn't like I didn't try to move because I wanted to be kissed. How do I put this… Shizuku seemed so mature and feminine that I became overwhelmed."

"In other words, you were fascinated by your little sister who turned out to be so pretty after four years."

"No, I'm saying it's not like that…"

Shizuku was still Ikki's sister. He had never thought of her as more than that, and he absolutely never would. But today, seeing her again after four years… those alluring wet eyes, lightly blushing face, and lonely lips… if asked whether he saw Shizuku as a woman now, he couldn't deny it with full conviction.

"…maybe."

"Sis-con."

"Erk."

"Pervert."

"I… have no excuse."

Oh no, maybe I was hungry for girls after all. To be charmed by my little sister after four years….

Stella glared as he stumbled toward their shared bathroom.

"And where are you going?"

"I'm gonna cool my face in the shower a bit."

He had taken too many jolts today. Washing up and going to bed early would be best.

Part 7

"So irritating."

After Ikki entered the bathroom, Stella bit her lips and pouted. What was that "maybe"? He should've denied it with all his strength!

"...Even though you said I'm beautiful."

But to be distracted by his sister? It was so vexing that she couldn't settle down. Despite saying he wanted to be friends and sharing the same room, why was he still not approaching her yet? Stella had prepared for Ikki, waking up before him every morning to mend her bed hair so he wouldn't see her unsightly appearance, and she was ready every night for him to engage in that legendary Japanese "yobai" tradition[7].

Wait, it's not like I want to do that! If it happened, then of course I'd refuse! I'd kick him! A princess can't have a premarital sexual relationship! But....

But she couldn't bear to leave things as they were.

"Even though you called an unmarried girl beautiful! Even though you told me you wanted to get along better!"

What was the big idea, spitting out all that nonsense and then leaving her hanging? Was this what they call "not feeding a fish that's already been caught"? She wanted an explanation, and he had better apologize for being mesmerized by his sister after getting kissed.

"Ah, dang it! Idiot! Ikki, you idiot! Sis-con! Just die!"

Stella felt like crying as she hit her pillow, spouting abusive language all the while.

What if Ikki wasn't interested in Stella as a woman? What if she wasn't what Ikki wanted? What if he was more interested in loli-type girls[8] like Shizuku? That was bad, because even though Stella wasn't tall, she'd been confident in her mature body, but what if Ikki got so caught up in being a sis-con he turned into a lolicon[9] too? Then Stella's figure would be completely incompatible with his tastes.

That would be terrible. She didn't want that. She couldn't allow that.

"—Alright."

So Stella hatched a plan.

Part 8

「Siscon.」

"Haaaa…."

Ikki sank deeper into the bathtub after remembering Stella's words, and his feelings sank with him.

"Maybe she hates me now…."

「Pervert.」

"Wow…."

Was there a man not disheartened by a girl calling him a pervert? Honestly, it was quite unbearable, especially since those harsh words came from Stella. Ikki respected Stella Vermillion as a real knight, because despite her great talent, she always aimed higher and never went easy on herself. Could he do the same if he were similarly gifted? …Of course, she was a fascinating woman too, and being hated by someone he admired both as a knight and a woman left him quite depressed. He had to sweep away this bad impression as soon as he could.

"But I should also talk with Shizuku tomorrow."

While changing Stella's impression was important, he also had to make Shizuku understand she was no longer a child, so she couldn't go around kissing her brother. There was nothing good in Shizuku growing up so cute only to ruin their joyful reunion that way.

Just as Ikki thought that, Stella—wearing a bikini—charged into the cramped bathroom.

"I-I'm coming in."

What could this be? For some reason, Ikki felt he had made some great mistake, like thinking he just saw a whale in a pond. Ah, of course. It was strange for Stella to wear a swimsuit in the bathroom. Strange, and improper, and even impractical. A towel, even if it seemed embarrassing, made more sense—

"—No no no no no!"

Ikki almost flipped upside down at this suddenly nonsensical development.

"That's not the issue but it's weird by itself! First of all, why would you even come in here!? I don't get the situation!"

"W-What!? You don't have to be that shocked, right?"

"I'm shocked anyway! Of course I'd be! Seriously, what's going on!? Why would you put on a bikini and enter the bathroom that I was already in!?"

"You… can't tell?"

"I can't guess at all!"

"That… I-I was thinking of washing Ikki's body…."

Dizziness struck him. His head was spinning. His body boiled. He must be hallucinating.

Stella wants to wash my body? Hahaha, yeah right. What kinky video game did I fall into?

"Sorry Stella, it seems I'm not quite myself right now. I think I heard something absurd. Could you repeat that?"

"I mean… that… you know? I'm your slave, right? Then washing my master's body is my duty as a maid, yeah."

"Oh-ho, so that's all it was. Being a maid sure is tough."

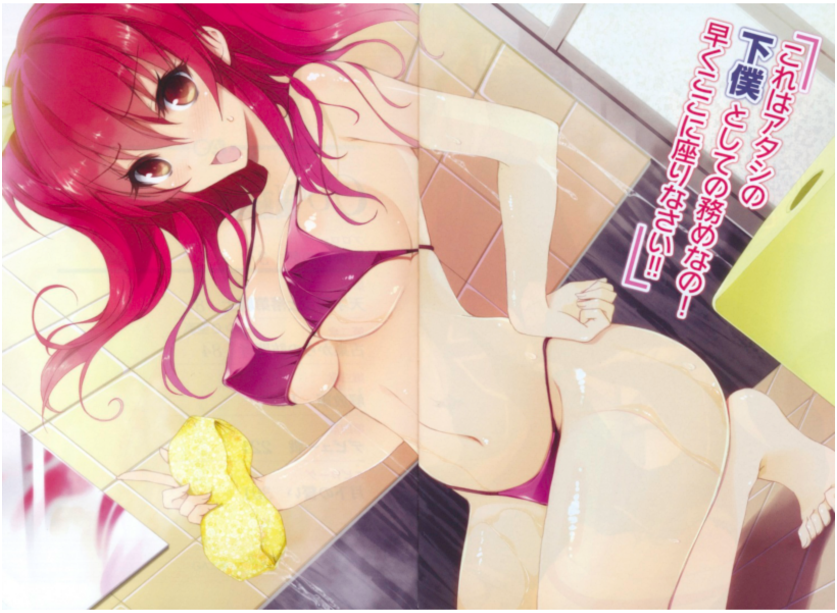
…What!?

"N-No, w-wait a minute! I never asked for that!"

"I'd do it even without you asking! Didn't Hideyoshi warm up Nobunaga's sandals[10] even though he didn't ask!? It's like that!"

"What are you even talking about!?"

"Anyhow! This is my duty as your slave! So hurry up and sit!"


「これはアタシの下僕としての務めなの！
早くここに座りなさい!!」

"There's no way I can do that! There's no way I can have you do that! All this stuff about masters and slaves is definitely wrong! First Shizuku, and now Stella, what the heck happened to a girl's sense of virtue!?"

"It's fine if I say it is! Just do as I tell you! If you don't—"

Stella paused for a moment, and fire started to scatter from her hair.

"I'll boil you!"

Part 9

Rub rub rub

Stella, princess of the Vermillion Empire, was currently wearing a swimsuit and kneeling before Ikki, washing his body that only had a towel around his hips.

W-What was going on…? Ikki's head was about to go haywire. Or maybe it went bad a long while ago. If not, he wished it had.

"Be sure to keep your promise. I'll play along with this prank for today, but I'll definitely not do so from tomorrow on."

"I-I get it already. I'm not going through with this because I want to, you know. I lost, and became your slave, so that's why it has to happen."

…Why can't you just not do it?

But asking her would do no good, not after his last few requests. According to Stella, washing was supposed to be a slave's duty, so she wouldn't settle down without carrying it out at least once. Ikki didn't understand, but with her royal pride fired up, he couldn't easily argue her reasoning.

Anyway, just today. I'll bear with it just for today and then forget it all…!

Ikki swore that to himself while Stella washed his body. However—

"…Uh."

His eyes were drawn to Stella's bikini-clad body. Reason was telling him not to stare, but his instincts wouldn't listen. He pretended to look away, but his emotions forced him to peek.

Right now, he was looking at the flawless figure of this charming roommate he couldn't understand. Stella was far more exposed than when he saw her half-naked that first day, exposing the pale shadows of the collarbone at the bottom of her long but thin neck, her tightly straightened shoulders, and her hips that drew a sweet line to the edges of her long and tender white legs. And among her striking features, the most outrageous was… her breasts. White and massive breasts, colossal enough to bulge tightly from her bikini. Fully ripe and peachy fruit that couldn't be hidden by her uniform. Bulges that swayed left and right while squishing every time Stella moved her body even slightly. Seeing them, Ikki felt his brain empty of blood, and his throat burned with thirst.

This is… impossible to take….

There was no way he could turn away or shut his eyes. Ikki was more temperate than most boys, maybe even too serious, but he was still a healthy sixteen-year-old lad. He wasn't adult enough to remove his attention from the bewitching body of a younger girl right in front of him. He couldn't help but stare furtively at every nook and cranny of her alluring, seductive limbs. Thank goodness Stella hadn't noticed it.

…Still, Stella really is beautiful.

Of course, Stella was beautiful as a woman, but her body was also beautiful as a knight. Ikki could see how Stella tormented herself to get that far. She had an unyielding will despite possessing so much talent. Her body could be a sculpture of her soul.

Really beautiful.

It was the first time Ikki realized her figure was this lovely. It was also the first time he wanted to touch it so badly. Of course, he knew that touching would be unforgivable, but—

At the same time, from Stella's perspective….

He's been staring so hard for a while now….

Stella had noticed Ikki's peeks long ago, since a woman was sensitive to a man's eyes, especially those of a man on her mind. It was probably that thing called "a woman's intuition", a sense that men didn't have, and hers immediately felt Ikki's feverish gaze and told Stella, *Oh no! He's looking! He's looking!*

"...Uu...fu...uu."

She was aware of that intense gaze, and her body started to heat up feverishly. His line of sight crept from her nape to her collarbone, breasts, navel, and thighs—as if he was brushing her whole body gently.

So embarrassing... I'm gonna faint....

But Stella didn't mind. No, she was relieved, because this was proof that Ikki didn't dislike her figure, or at least he wasn't indifferent to it. Seeing Ikki's body had unsettled her, and seeing hers had sent Ikki's heart thumping the same way. Stella was reassured by this, and very happy. She wouldn't lose. She definitely wouldn't lose to that little sister.

"Then, next... your back. I'll wash it...."

Stella turned towards Ikki's back after finishing his torso. Of course, she wasn't going to wash his bottom half. It was still too soon for that. Right. Not just yet.

"Y-Yeah, I'll leave it to you."

Ikki took care not to mention Stella ignoring his waist. If the situation called for him to take off his towel, he was prepared to escape even if he had to smash through a wall.

Only the back left. It'll all be over after that....

As long as he didn't look at Stella's body, controlling himself was quite simple. Having his back washed made him a little uneasy, but he didn't need to move his chest or abdomen. He could endure. He could pass this mysterious ordeal. And then he'd forget it entirely, never recalling what happened here today or speaking a word of it to anyone. May it lie buried and abandoned in the deepest corner of his memories.

As Ikki resolved himself, Stella suddenly spoke behind him, her voice as soft as a butterfly's wings beating.

"Hey, Ikki."

"What is it?"

"Um. You, see… erm, I mean, there's something… I'd like to… ask you…."

"Sure, that's fine. What is it?"

"Ikki… you… do you like… girls with breasts?"

Ikki felt a hammer hitting the back of his head.

"Wha! Ah, you—! W-W-What are you…!"

"I mean… weren't you staring… a while ago?"

Waaaaaaah!

He'd been caught! She caught him stealing glances!

Ikki wanted to die. Disappear. Let him turn to wind this instant.

"I'm sorry! I knew it wasn't good to stare like that! But you have to understand—!"

"Y-You don't have to apologize. Just answer my question."

The question? He'd rather cast himself face-first onto the ground before her than answer that. To be asked about his preferences by a girl right behind him, what kind of crazy penalty game was this? Terrible, it was just too terrible. Had he called down some god's wrath?

He was mortified, but—Ikki had no escape, so he resigned himself and squeezed out a tiny reply.

"I… do."

"…Hmph."

…

……

………S-Say something!

"H-Hey, Stella—"

Ikki nearly died from the silence, but the moment he spoke up—

Squish!

—two round things, springier than a sponge and far softer than one's palms, pressed against his back. Numbness bolted up his spine and into his brain, short-circuiting Ikki's consciousness instantly.

Incomprehensible. Everything had happened behind him in his blind spot. No matter how excellent his vision, Ikki couldn't see somewhere he couldn't look. But even if he were fully blind, he'd still know what had happened.

"S-Stella… just now… you…!"

Before he could demand an explanation, Stella dashed from the bathroom with lightning speed, her face red to her ears.

"Why!?"

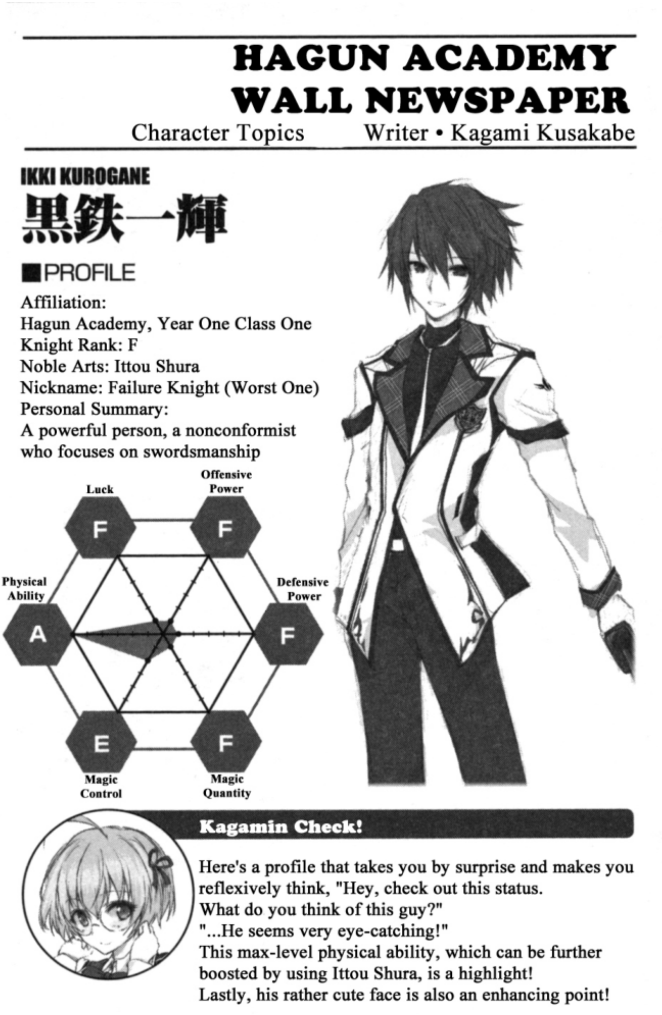
First Shizuku, and now Stella. Just by being the other gender, do people really become that hard to understand!?

Ikki couldn't comprehend a single thing that had happened since waking up this day. But one thing he could say for sure: he'd never forget that sensation.

References

1. ↑ *Sensei*: "Teacher", used as a form of address.
2. ↑ *Senpai*: A more senior member of an organization. In the case of a school, it is equivalent to "upperclassman".
3. ↑ *Onii-sama*: "Big brother", spoken as a highly respectful form of address.
4. ↑ *Sis-con*: A person with a "sister complex", who dotes too much on his sister.
5. ↑ *Yoishigure*, 宵時雨: "Evening Rain"
6. ↑ *Kodachi*: A Japanese shortsword, essentially a short katana.
7. ↑ *Yobai*: A traditional Japanese practice, where a man sneaks into a woman's house and bed during the night to have consensual and discreet sexual intercourse, then sneaks back out of the house before morning without disturbing the rest of the household. It is often done with the household's knowledge, such as before intended marriage.
8. ↑ *Loli*: Abbreviation of "Lolita", a precocious and sexually seductive underage girl.
9. ↑ *Lolicon*: A person with a "Lolita complex", who is attracted to underage girls.
10. ↑ During the last part of Japan's Warring States period near the mid-1500s, the samurai warlord Nobunaga Oda began the unification of Japan's various domains. Hideyoshi Toyotomi was a peasant-born servant of Oda, initially working as Oda's sandal-bearer, but Toyotomi's accomplishments as negotiator and general raised him above his low status and birth, and he is today considered one of the three main personages who unified Japan alongside Oda and fellow Oda supporter Ieyasu Tokugawa.

Chapter 3: Rebellion



HAGUN ACADEMY WALL NEWSPAPER

Character Topics Writer • Kagami Kusakabe

IKKI KUROGANE

黒鉄一輝

■PROFILE

Affiliation:
Hagun Academy, Year One Class One
Knight Rank: F
Noble Arts: Ittou Shura
Nickname: Failure Knight (Worst One)
Personal Summary:
A powerful person, a nonconformist who focuses on swordsmanship

Luck F
Offensive Power F
Physical Ability A
Defensive Power F
Magic Control E
Magic Quantity F

Kagamin Check!

Here's a profile that takes you by surprise and makes you reflexively think, "Hey, check out this status.
What do you think of this guy?"
"...He seems very eye-catching!"
This max-level physical ability, which can be further boosted by using Ittou Shura, is a highlight!
Lastly, his rather cute face is also an enhancing point!

Part 1

Shizuku Kurogane had a man she loved. He the only person who showed her a kind smile among the grim-faced adults of her childhood, her one-year-older brother by blood, Ikki Kurogane. Shizuku loved him, so she suddenly kissed him at their reunion.

But Shizuku didn't see Ikki that way at first.

Four years ago, she loved him only as a younger sister would, and though her feelings changed when he left home, that separation hadn't formed romance in her heart. No, it only made Shizuku realize how her parents, eldest brother, and other relatives had ignored Ikki. Why didn't she notice her brother's pain before he disappeared, even though she was so close to him? She'd been tormented by unending regret, which turned to fury toward her family for hindering her gentle brother even after he severed ties, simply because he lacked talent. Simply because "Producing an F-Rank knight would disgrace the family name."

So Shizuku Kurogane decided, who cares about "taboo"? Who cares if their father, their mother, if the whole world no longer loved Ikki? She'd love her brother in their place, enough that no one else in this world would be nearly so loved.

But then something intolerable appeared: Ikki's self-declared slave, Stella Vermillion. Shizuku knew just by looking that Stella was interested in her brother and seducing him under pretext. That girl, that eyesore, was recklessly trying to cross the line with him. Even today, after Shizuku's house arrest was lifted and she invited Ikki to the movies as celebration, Stella intruded and demanded to join them.

Shizuku couldn't stand this. Her brother, being the kind of person he was, allowed Stella to tag along after hearing an excuse like "I don't know this country well so I'd like to find out more". Shizuku had been upset, but of course she was upset at Stella, not at Ikki, because Shizuku considered her brother the most wonderful of men. And that was why she couldn't tolerate Stella coiling around Ikki.

"…That sow."

Shizuku's roommate, Nagi Arisuin, smiled at her griping.

"Oh my, such a bad mood today too. Did something happen with the princess again?"

"…Yes."

Fresh from the bath, Shizuku replied in a seething rage while Arisuin combed her hair. She usually spoke politely, even with Stella and of course with her brother, but she wasn't so reserved around Arisuin. Her expression wasn't as aloof as usual either; she was pouting, which Arisuin could easily see.

"Haha. A maiden in love sure has it rough."

Shizuku had already explained it all to her roommate. She naturally despised others regardless of gender, because her shyness had turned to mistrust after Ikki left home. Who was she supposed to trust in this world where parents could feel nothing for their children? Yet she told Arisuin about her love even though she met this person only a week or so ago.

It seems kind of fun to just talk with Alice….

Arisuin listened to what others had to say, and let others speak as they pleased. When Shizuku was delighted about something, Arisuin also became happy, but never meddled in matters Shizuku didn't share. Shizuku had brothers, but Arisuin was the perfect model for an older sister, so Shizuku sometimes simply told Arisuin too much.

"Hey, Alice."

"Wh~at?"

"...Do you think it's strange for a sister to love her brother?"

Shizuku knew she was being childish, so why did she ask this unnecessary question? It was because she wanted Arisuin to guess her feelings, and give a different answer.

"Under common sense, of course it is. I don't think society can accept something like that. You should know it even without me saying so, right? But if you love him anyway, then I think it's a real and splendid love."

As usual, Arisuin guessed right.

"Sorry, Alice. I asked something pathetic...."

"My my, isn't it just fine? Seeing you think of him so much, I feel your love is something truly beautiful."

"Thanks. I'm not the least embarrassed about how I feel. But still, I'm worried whether Onii-sama will accept me."

"That's a contest of patience, I think. If he cherishes you as a sister, then it would be quite hard to become a woman in his eyes. The princess has an advantage in not having to jump that hurdle."

"Ooh...."

Arisuin's calm analysis turned Shizuku gloomy. In truth, Shizuku wasn't so devoid of common sense. She knew she shouldn't push herself on her brother, but she needed to approach him even if it meant loosening the screws in her head a bit. She needed to turn herself from a sister into a woman for Ikki, overwhelming him if that was what it took. The distance between them had broadened after four years, and if she didn't close it now, she'd have no chance at all. But even an overwhelming attack would repel her brother if it lacked charm. He might not even love her as his sister someday. Shizuku was so uneasy about it, she could break into tears at any moment.

Arisuin sensed Shizuku's depression.

"Don't make that disheartened face. Your rival does have her own obstacle in social position, after all. And there's no man who'd hate being approached by an assertive girl. If the girl's as cute as you, that's all the more exciting."

But is that really true...?

Shizuku didn't know if she was the kind of girl Arisuin described, but if Arisuin said men were like that, then that was how they must be. Arisuin definitely understood men better than she did.

"Thanks, Alice. I feel a lot better now."

"You're welcome~♪ ...But still, a kiss like that right after meeting him is a bit too much, you know. I know it was also meant to fix your resolve, but if you do something so grand right from the start, you'll make your partner defensive instead."

"...I'm regretting it too."

"Then it's fine. You have to melt a guy's conscience slowly and carefully... just like melting a piece of candy with your tongue. Now leave tomorrow's date to me. I'll give you a makeover like you've never seen before—♡"

"That's right. I have Alice with me. I won't lose to that person."

If her rival was going to exploit being Ikki's slave, then Shizuku would use her status as Ikki's sister to the utmost. She wasn't about to give up, not when she was the only one who could understand her kind and lonely brother. She couldn't leave him to that girl. Strangers cared only for themselves, but Shizuku would never betray her brother. She'd never make him sad. She'd stay by his side forever, and her feelings would last even longer. That was why she had chased him this far.

Never... I'll never let that girl have him.

Arisuin's words gave Shizuku courage, and she regained the energy she lost when Stella intruded on their date.

"I'll do my best!"

"That's the spirit. Okay, it's done."

Arisuin turned off the dryer, and Shizuku's silver hair rustled when she tilted her head. It was completely different from when she styled it herself. When Shizuku learned of Arisuin's amazing skills, she stopped fixing her own appearance and allowed Arisuin to completely spoil her.

I want to do something for Alice too, but….

But what could she offer? Shizuku thought of something and turned around.

"That's right. Hey Alice, how about going with us for tomorrow's movie?"

"Oh, is that okay? Won't I be in the way?"

"It's fine. The date was ruined the moment that person joined."

"Haha, that's true too. Then please let me come along. I was hoping to chat with the brother you're so proud of at least once."

Good, Alice seems happy about it.

Shizuku quickly sent her brother a mail. Ikki was bringing his own roommate, so he should understand.

"Looks like tomorrow will be fun. If he turns out to be a good man, maybe I'll try for him too."

"Eh? Sorry, I didn't quite hear that. Could you repeat it… if you can, that is?"

"No, I'm sorry! That was a joke so please stop pointing Yoishigure at my neck!"

It was fine as a joke, but if Arisuin was being serious, Shizuku couldn't help but draw blood.

Part 2

On the morning of the day they arranged to see a movie with Shizuku, Ikki Kurogane and Stella Vermillion stood waiting at the academy's main gates. They weren't in their usual uniforms; Ikki had on a comfortable-looking shirt and jeans, while Stella wore a cardigan that had a springtime feel to it, on top of an elegantly trimmed white blouse.

"They're late, Ikki. What are they doing?"

"We could've left together if we were in the same dorm, but…."

Ikki and Stella lived in student dormitory number one, but Shizuku was in dormitory number two on the opposite side of campus, with the main school building located between them. That was why they were meeting near the gate, but the time for their rendezvous had passed long ago and Shizuku was still nowhere to be seen.

"Well, I think they'll be here in a moment. I never figured Stella to be interested in movies, though."

When Shizuku asked him out, Stella had immediately jumped up shouting "I'll go too! I'll definitely go! I'll go even if you tell me not to!" It had been an astonishingly vigorous reaction.

"Leaving you alone with Shizuku in a dark cramped space is way too dangerous."

"Eh? Why is it dangerous?"

"And so is how you can't notice incoming disaster! Did you forget what happened on the first day?"

"Ah—"

There was certainly no way Ikki could forget that. In truth, it had been his first kiss.

"If that's what you're worried about, didn't Shizuku apologize the next day? She said she was overcome with emotion after meeting me after four years, and that she's reflecting on it. Besides, I'm just her older brother so I won't be eaten alive like that again."

"...If you don't want to be eaten then don't get so close to her...."

"Huh? What was that?"

"I called you a sis-con."

"I-I'm not a sis-con! No, Shizuku is my precious little sister and I love her very much, but how many times do I have to tell you she's just my sister? Related by blood! I definitely won't start seeing her as a woman just because we've been apart for four years!"

"Really? You won't be captivated anymore?"

"Yes!"

There's no way he'd get excited after seeing his sister. It was painful to deny something so obvious, but as Ikki lamented how little Stella trusted him, the one they were waiting for arrived.

"Sorry to make you wait, Onii-sama."

"Ah, Shizu—"

"You're so late. What were you...."

Ikki and Stella turned around to reply, and their expressions froze as Shizuku apologized with her head bowed.

"I'm sorry, I took too long picking out what to wear."

For some reason Shizuku looked even prettier than usual. She was wearing a Gothic Lolita[1] outfit that made the best use of her silver hair and small build, greatly raising the charm of a girl who was originally like a bisque doll. She looked much better in these clothes than in her school uniform.

Still, Shizuku had worn this style in childhood, and Ikki was already familiar with it, so he shouldn't have felt anything special about such clothing. But the magic Shizuku gave off didn't allow that.

…*B-Beautiful.*

Shizuku stood before him under a halo of sunlight, and the scenery around her seemed to dim. What kind of devilish magic had she cast to draw his attention so much? Ikki fell silent and the back of his tongue went dry… but looking more carefully, he quickly realized the source of this witchcraft: makeup. Her eyes were painted with light eye shadow, and there was a faint crimson on her lips. Her eyebrows were curled flawlessly, and each strand of silver hair was dancing in the breeze so together they gave off a faint argent radiance, as if Shizuku herself was shining. All these changes improved her appearance without diminishing her charm—no, they raised that charm many times over, making Shizuku look not like a sister, not like a child, but as a fascinating woman.

Stella howled at this sight.

"W-What is this!? It's cheating! This appearance, it's no amateur work! Did you call a stylist!?"

"I'm not a princess so I wouldn't cheat, and I don't know any stylists. My roommate was the one who helped me."

"Roommate?"

Ikki blinked.

"Ah, was it Arisuin-san who's coming with us today?"

They had already learned the name from Shizuku's mail. According to Shizuku, Arisuin was an "older onee-san"[2] type of person.

"Yes, Alice should be here shortly."

And just as Shizuku spoke, Arisuin appeared behind her.

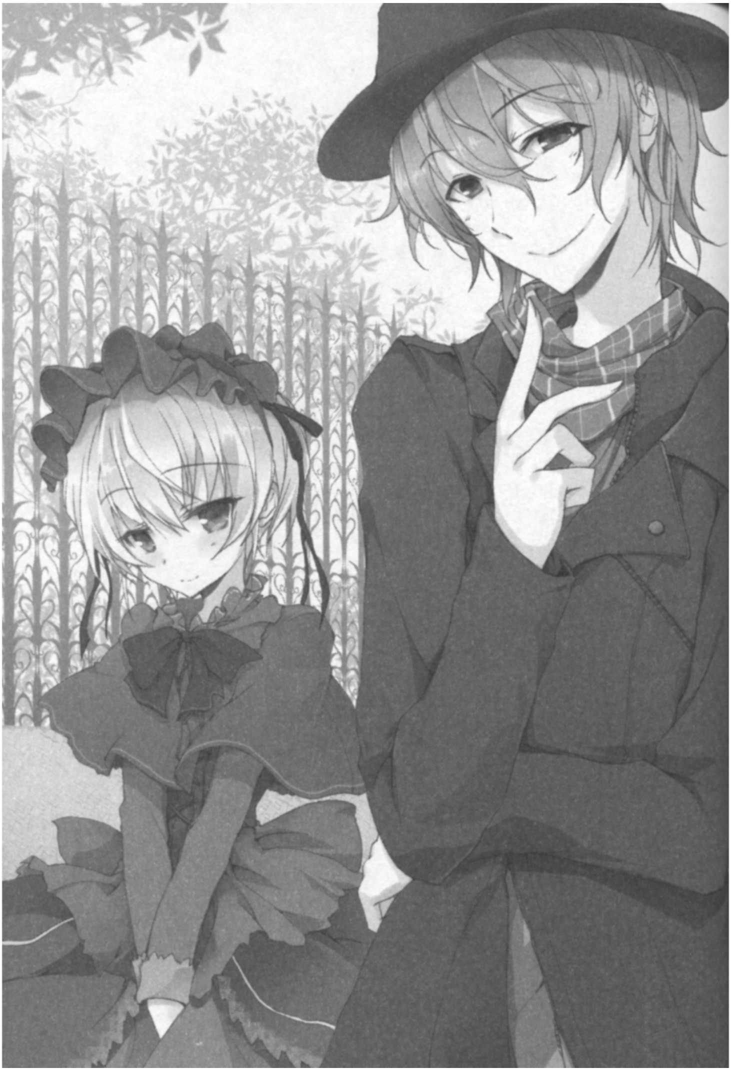
"Jeez, you left too quickly, Shizuku. If you trip, the makeup will be ruined, you know?"

But—

"Eh?"

Stella and Ikki's expressions once again froze, because no matter what angle they looked, the person who did Shizuku's professional-level makeup was… a boy.

Part 3



"Hahaha. Nice to meet you, and thank you for inviting me today.

I'm Shizuku's roommate, Nagi Arisuin. I'm not much for being called by my full name, so I'd be happy if you call me Alice—♪"

The boy with the tall and lean figure was dressed like Shizuku, with a visual-kei[3] type of appearance. He took off his bowler hat and greeted them with smile, reaching out for a handshake.

"E-Eh, erm, nice to meet you too."

"Ah, yes, how do you do…?"

Ikki and Stella nervously returned the greeting, but they couldn't hide their unrest and started whispering to each other.

"H-Hey wait Ikki, what's going on?"

"Err, it troubles me too, you know."

Both of them had thought Arisuin was a girl, but no matter how they looked, that wasn't true. He might be a little thin for a guy, but not enough to mistake him for a woman. And he was taller than Ikki, probably past 180 centimeters.

"His speech and gestures are girlish, right? Is this a gag? Should I laugh?"

"I'm telling you I can't answer these questions."

"Hahaha. Look, Shizuku, they both seem mesmerized by my beauty."

"What's with that positive thinking!?"

Stella and Ikki retorted in unison, then Ikki scratched the back of his head.

"Erm, Alice-san?"

"You don't have to use '-san'. I'm bad with formality."

"Then, Alice… are you, erm… an okama[4]?"

"Not at all. I'm just a maiden born in a man's body."

"W-What's the difference, Stella…!?"

"Don't you start asking me!"

Looking at the two who were obviously uneasy, Shizuku spoke.

"Does it really trouble you?"

Since their confusion was seen through, Ikki awkwardly scratched his cheek.

"Aha, haha. Well, I knew people like that exist, but this is my first time actually meeting one, and I'm not sure how to talk with them, so… sorry."

"Oh, you don't have to apologize. I'm used to it. But Shizuku wasn't bothered at all, you know."

Shizuku glanced to one side.

"Because I don't really care about genders that much—"

Ikki was deeply moved by how easily Shizuku declared she didn't mind Arisuin's circumstances, even though he couldn't hide his own bewilderment at meeting someone from the tribe called okama.

I haven't seen Shizuku in so long, but she sure has matured a lot.

Having the heart to allow things that goes against common values, it was something he needed to learn.

"—since it doesn't matter whether they're male or female. I simply dislike humanity in general."

Praise retracted. Someone please find the glue to mend his sister's splintered heart.

"Well, Alice isn't a type you'd come by often, but she considers herself a woman and I do likewise. Both Onii-sama and Stella-san, if you can, please think of her as a woman as well, and treat her so."

"I'll try my best."

"Thank you, but you don't have to push yourself. I'd hate to make things awkward, you know."

Arisuin was quite smooth, giving them an escape route like that.

"Anyway, this means everyone's gathered, so we should head for the movie theater."

Ikki nodded.

"That's right. Just standing here is boring too."

"There's still a while until the movie starts, so let's take our time, Onii-sama."

Shizuku proposed that after looking at her wristwatch, and entwined her arm with Ikki's as if it was completely natural. It was a position she took while walking with Ikki, back when they were kids.

"Whoa!"

Ikki yelped. His hardened resolve was already about to break, and frankly the possibility that Shizuku would bewitch him today was strong. He wanted to pull away, but....

"Mmm, it's been a long time since we last walked like this. Right, Onii-sama?"

"Eh, y-yes. That's... right."

He couldn't say anything when Shizuku smiled so happily as she remembered the past. Shizuku yearned for his love as a sister, and wished to stand beside him like this, but he couldn't see her as his sister. His heart was too uncool.

But even if Shizuku wished for nothing more, there was no way Stella could quietly let it pass. She suddenly cut in between them.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing so suddenly!"

"What? This is just simple skinship[5] between siblings. We used to walk like this plenty."

"Ah, erm. Ahaha, that's true."

"Th-Then me too—"

"I thought you'd say that, so I prepared just the thing. Here, a leash. Please use this to enjoy a slave's skinship to the fullest."

"Oh, how thoughtful—yeah right! Just where is your mind turning!?"

"But walking beside your master lacks propriety, you know. You said you snapped at me only because you're Onii-sama's slave, yet you don't honor that relationship correctly? I think I see the real Vermillion princess."

"Um—"

"No, it's alright. If you want to hold hands with Onii-sama then shouldn't you just go ahead? It's fine since he has two hands. But wanting to do this with a boy, do you have special feelings for him? Could it be that Stella-san, towards Onii-sama—"

"Th-There's nothing like that! I simply lost a duel with him and became his slave, that's all! That's our relationship—"

"Then there's no reason for you to hold hands, is there?"

And Stella was thwarted like so.

"Grrr…!"

"Shall we go, Onii-sama?"

"Y-Yeah…."

"…What was all that about not being captivated, you sis-con. Pervert…."

Ikki walked down the road with Shizuku on his arm, while Stella's curses hammered his back over and over. Could the trip go peacefully with these two here?

It was the beginning of a day they would always remember with unease.

Part 4

There was a large shopping mall near Hagun Academy, and their destination Cinema Land was located on the fourth and highest floor. The group didn't head there right away, because as Shizuku pointed out, there was still a while until the movie started. The fourth floor only had the theater and some merchandise shops so they didn't need to go there so early. Instead, the group went to the food court on the first floor to pass some time.

"Nn~. This is delicious~"

Stella's voice started to waver at the taste of the crepes they bought on Arisuin's recommendation. Shizuku agreed, and nibbled away with her small mouth.

"I thought they were ridiculously expensive, but they're really worth it."

Arisuin nodded as well.

"It is, right? The crepes from this court uses some very rich cream—♪ But if it's ice cream, I'd suggest the Thirteen Ice Cream shop [6] on the third floor."

"You seem familiar with a lot of things."

"Well, visiting this place from time to time pays off. And pastry is something every girl lives for—♪"

"Alice is definitely the one to ask about sweet pastries or beautiful clothes, if you're looking for anything."

"I haven't seen any shops that sell dresses for a cute princess, but for tasty sweets I can point you to a number of places. Shall I be the guide today?"

"Really? Wow, sounds fun! What other stores do you know about?"

"Well, there's a coffee shop in this mall, and the tiramisu there is—"

While the girls(?) had fun eating crepes and discussing food, Ikki watched from outside their circle. He didn't like sweets that much, so he couldn't find a way to join this conversation.

But Alice sure mixed in fast.

Even Stella, who had been more surprised about Arisuin, was talking with him far more closely than she did with the boys in class. Arisuin really might be the onee-san type, though girls would probably fall in love with his beauty alone.

While Ikki sipped his iced coffee in solitude, he noticed a bit of cream stuck on Shizuku's cheek.

Uh oh.

That would sully the make-up. Sure, Ikki felt nervous about Shizuku's appearance, and he was relieved and thankful to not be mesmerized anymore, but…

…But still, the makeup took so much time to prepare, spoiling it would be such a waste.

"Hey, Shizuku."

"Yes? What is it?"

When Shizuku turned towards him, he wiped the cream off her cheek with his finger and—

"This was on your face. Since you went to the trouble of dressing up so nicely, you should be more careful."

—he licked it off without any hesitation at all.

Shizuku's whole body went red as if she had burst into flame, and she dashed behind Arisuin's chair. Taking cover immediately whenever she got embarrassed was one of Shizuku's old habits.

"My my, can it be that Shizuku's the type with all attack and no defense?"

"Sh-Sh-Shut up Alice! It happened so s-suddenly, I-I was just a bit surprised!"

Ikki watched Shizuku stutter while hiding behind Alice.

"You really don't have to be so embarrassed just because of some cream."

Alice smiled at his comment.

"I don't think that's the reason, but great job, big brother."

"Oh? Then why?"

"Hahaha—♪ That's not something you should hear from me."

Arisuin smoothly dodged his question. And from the side of the table, Stella started coughing violently.

"Sorry, sorry."

"Huh, Stella? What's the matter? Do you have a cold or—"

When Ikki turned, he saw Stella's whole mouth covered in cream, like she was wearing a Santa Claus beard.

"What's the matter, Ikki? You look so shocked. Is there something on my face?"

"You think there isn't!? That's even more shocking!"

"I-I-If there's something… then… that… can't you wipe it off, l-like with Shizuku?"

"No, it's not an amount I can wipe off with a finger! I'll bring a towel, so just wait a bit."

"Huh? But—"

Not pausing for Stella to finish her words, Ikki went to borrow a towel from the shop clerk.

"…Erm. Stella-san… Could it be… that you're a moron?"

"Oh, that was so awkwardly cute it makes me want to help you out too."

"Sh-Sh-Shut up! It's not like I had a secret motive or anything! My hand just slipped and it got on my mouth! That's all! Really!"

Part 5

After the four of them finished eating crepes, they ended up chatting until the movie was about to start.

"It seems to be about time, so let's go to the fourth floor."

When Shizuku proposed that, all of them prepared to leave the food court, which was when Stella raised a very late question.

"Hey Ikki, what movie are we watching today?"

"I don't know yet."

After all, the invitation came from the cute little sister Ikki hadn't seen in four years. He wouldn't refuse in any case, so he didn't ask for that detail.

"…You, why did you even come here?"

"Shouldn't we ask you the same thing?"

"I'm only here to chaperone, so it's fine. Shizuku, what movie are we watching?"

"Just a normal love story."

"Of course it is. You see? I was right to tag along!"

Stella sighed.

"And the title?"

"*I Fell in Love with My Little Sister.* Rated R-15[7]."

"How is that a normal love story!?"

"It's a love that's normal and pure, if you don't mind them being siblings."

"How is something so immoral in any way pure!? And how little sense do you have!? You've got some nerve trying to see this stuff with your brother! You think the atmosphere is going to be normal? That'll go way past mere surprise!"

"I don't want a lecture from someone who declares herself a slave in front of all her classmates."

That was quite an apt rebuttal, but Ikki wasn't so lacking in sense that he'd see a movie like this alone with his little sister.

"Shi-Shizuku.... let's not watch this."

"Eh~? Why? What's wrong with it?"

"Please explain what's not wrong with it."

Wouldn't it be terrible if he, with his little sister, had to see an R-rated love story about a forbidden sibling relationship?

"A-Anyhow, I can't do it! Let's watch something else!"

"Hrm, if you're that unwilling, I guess I'll have to accept it. What do we watch then?"

Shizuku used her student datapad to access the theater's website, and Stella voiced a preference.

"Ah! Isn't this one good? *Karna, the Desert Queen*. It's an animated movie where Princess Karna gets kidnapped by desert bandits but ends up falling in love with the young bandit leader. It sounds like a romantic—"

"Rejected."

"Why!?"

"I don't want to see a movie starring a bitch who opens her legs for a hoodlum she doesn't know anything about."

"It's far better than a perverted movie where siblings do this and that!"

Alice sighed.

"Well, it seems like we won't make up our minds even if we argue more. How about we compromise and go with *Men's Fallen Paradise*? Also R-15."

"Who said to compromise on gender!?"

Stella and Shizuku's comeback was in complete harmony. Maybe they could get along rather well, even if it made Alice pout.

"How inflexible. Then there's only one option left, an action movie."

Ikki glanced at the schedule.

"There's not much time before it starts, though."

"That's unavoidable since it's a small theater."

"But I think both boys and girls can enjoy an action film. Is that okay with you two?"

"Ugh. It's regrettable, but if Onii-sama says so...."

"We don't have any other choices. But since I like action too, that's fine I guess."

Alice nodded at Shizuku and Stella's responses.

"Then there we go. The movie will start soon, so let's hurry."

"By the way Alice, what's the title?"

"*Gandhi, the Nirvana of Rage*."

On the website's movie poster, beneath the word Gandhi, there was a macho man in a tank top carrying heavy weaponry and standing against a flaming background. The tag line was "You said forgiveness is a sign of strength, huh? That's a lie."

"What the heck is that!? I wanna see it!"

Drawn to that exaggerated image, they reached an easy consensus, so Ikki and company headed for the escalator going up to the fourth floor. But as they reached the third, Ikki stepped off.

"Sorry everyone, I need to go to the washroom. Please buy the tickets for me."

Arisuin also followed Ikki.

"Oh my, I think I'll join you."

Stella and Shizuku nodded.

"Then we'll go on ahead and buy your share, so pay back the money later."

"And please get back before the movie starts. There's not much time left, you know."

"Okay, we'll come back as soon as we can."

"Shizuku Shizuku, I want a seat beside Ikki~♪"

"Onii-sama, we're buying tickets for three."

"No! That was a joke, a joke!"

And so Stella and Shizuku left, while the two boys headed for the third floor washroom.

"Hahaha~♪ Finally, it's just the two of us."

Ikki cringed at Arisuin's words.

"Umm, if you say it like that...."

"Eh? Heading for the washroom wasn't an excuse?"

"You're totally wrong!"

"I know, I was just kidding. You really are easy to tease."

"…Sorry, it's my first time talking with someone like you, so I can't seem to grasp the distance well…."

"You just have to treat me like a normal girl—"

Yeah, that's not possible.

"—but don't worry, I'm not interested in straight men."

"S-Straight!?"

"In other words, I'm not sexually interested in you."

"O-Oh, so that's what you mean. Yeah, that helps, that really helps."

"But it's true that I wanted to talk with you alone. I've heard a lot of things from Shizuku so I was wondering what kind of person you were."

"I was also interested in you, I guess."

"Oh my? My my my! That's a surprise! Then should the two of us go and see *Men's Fallen Paradise* right now?"

"Not in that way! It's just that, you know, Shizuku's really shy so she doesn't make friends easily, especially with boys, so I was curious."

"Well, I'm just a normal girl… hey, what's with that look? Are you objecting?"

"No, not really."

Is he serious? Is he seriously saying that?

It really was impossible to know how people of this tribe think right after meeting one. Ikki knew he shouldn't step unprepared into a topic he didn't understand, so he changed it quickly.

"About the things you heard about me from Shizuku, what sort of stuff were they?"

"That's a secret between girls."

Arisuin put a long, slender, pianist-like finger before his lips. It might be unrefined, Ikki figured, to continue being bothered about this sort of behavior. Luckily, Arisuin relented.

"...But she told me Ikki Kurogane is a very strong and interesting man. After meeting you today, I agree. You're just like she said. But something bothers me. May I ask?"

"Sure."

"Is it true that you couldn't participate in any combat because of your family's interference?"

"Y-Yeah, the school banned me from doing so. From both classes and mock battles."

Ikki wondered whether Shizuku also talked about his dispute with the Kurogane house, even though it was considered a family disgrace unsuitable for gossip. Shizuku, still part of the Kurogane household, wouldn't share it unless she trusted Arisuin deeply.

"But it's fine this year. The new board chairman changed the policy."

"Isn't that just good fortune? What would you be doing if the chairman hadn't come?"

"Whatever I can, as usual. I didn't know about her appointment or plans when I decided to repeat the year, after all."

"Don't you think doing the same thing for another year would be pointless?"

"Not at all. I think Alice already knows this, but the teachers at the academy are professionals. They can grasp a student's strength just by looking at them. And for a mage-knight academy, there's nothing more noteworthy than producing a Seven Stars Sword King, so really, all I have to do is convince the teachers I can reach that level. I'll just become strong enough to make them believe it, no matter how many years it takes."

With effort, he would make himself so valuable that Hagun couldn't sell him out to the Kurogane house. Ikki kept his conviction strong as always.

"But I'm grateful to the new chairman. Even I wouldn't go through so much trouble if another road was open."

"I see. I understand now."

For a moment, Ikki saw something in Arisuin's eyes as Arisuin looked at him from an outsider's vantage. It was… pity.

"Ikki… you… you've become used to being hurt, haven't you?"

"Alice?"

"This is something from my own experience, so it might not apply to you. Strength is, in the end, all about just how much you're able to endure. If you don't let strength go once in a while, and continue to struggle under your burden, then one day you'll break hard enough that you can't be fixed anymore. Normally, the heart would cry out with all its anger, sadness, and irritation, that 'I want someone to know my pain' and 'I want someone to understand my sorrow'. But you've been holding it in so long you no longer hear that cry."

Ikki was surprised by these words. He couldn't understand them, even though Arisuin's face closed as if grieving.

"….Th-That, I don't think that's the case though."

Ikki didn't lack such emotions, and there were certainly times Ikki felt angry or sad. But Arisuin shook his head.

"No, you can't hear it. At the least, you can't right now. I mean, if you could, how would you stay so calm? How would you smile so easily?"

I haven't exactly sailed through life so far.

But still, Arisuin was probably over-thinking it, so Ikki couldn't do much but show a troubled smile even though Arisuin was talking so seriously with such a grim face. Arisuin sighed at Ikki's unclear expression.

Well, there's no way my words would reach him.

How much weight did these words possess? Ikki was a stranger whom Arisuin just met today, but even though Arisuin knew he wouldn't get far, he ended up trying anyway. He wanted to open Ikki's eyes, because not only was Ikki Kurogane important to Shizuku, but Arisuin also thought him a pleasant person.

In the end, Arisuin gave an encouraging smile, and kissed the silver rosary hung around his neck.

"It'd be nice if someone who can hear that cry for you ever appeared. I pray from the bottom of my heart, as a friend."

But Ikki didn't understand that prayer. Was he supposed to thank Arisuin? He couldn't help but be confused, and Arisuin's words remained in his mind, echoing almost as if it was a kind of revelation.

Suddenly, Arisuin's expression hardened. It wasn't the sad expression he just wore, but a tense one filled with concern. He started to scan their surroundings.

"Alice?"

"Ikki, could you follow me for a bit?"

Arisuin grabbed Ikki's arm and rushed onward.

"Eh? E-Eh!?"

"Just run."

Without listening to Ikki's complaints, Arisuin dashed towards the washroom they were headed for. Maybe he couldn't hold it anymore?

Just when Ikki thought that—he heard an explosion, glass breaking… and gunshots accompanied by screams.

Part 6

Two men wearing black combat uniforms and gas masks entered the washroom where Ikki and Arisuin were hiding.

「Good, all that's left is this men's room. I'll go search the stalls. You wait here.」

「Bah, why do we gotta check them one by one?」

「H-Hey!」

The man with the frivolous tone ignored his partner, aimed the muzzle of his M4 assault rifle towards the stalls, and swept the room with full-auto fire. By the time the gunshots stopped, all the stall doors had been blasted to ruin. Nobody there could come out unharmed, but blood didn't flow from any of the half-destroyed stalls.

「You see? Nobody's in.」

「Don't do stuff the lazy way! We're supposed to take the customers hostage, dammit!」

「I just wanted to fire a gun. Ain't it okay, since there's no blood anyway? So they're empty. Hahaha.」

「…If Bischof-san kills you, it won't be my problem.」

The sound of disturbing laughter followed the two men's exit, leaving only debris and a burnt smell in the restroom, but from the shadows cast by fluorescent ceiling lights, Arisuin and Ikki popped their heads up as if out of black water. After confirming that their enemies had left, Arisuin raised himself from the shadows.

"Hmm, looks like they're gone."

In his hand, a dagger shined with dark gray radiance.

"That's my *Darkness Hermit*[8]. Quite handy, right?"

"A power to manipulate shadows? It's certainly useful."

"Well, in a brightly lit field without any obstacles to make those shadows, it's not quite so good."

Ikki had guessed the same. This power was better suited for assassins than for knights.

"But if someone found out that you used your Device outside campus, you'll get in trouble."

"Harsh situations demand risky moves. I didn't have a choice here. It's okay if you don't tell anyone though."

Arisuin offered his other hand to Ikki, and when Ikki grabbed it, Arisuin pulled him up.

"I won't say anything. Thanks for saving us. Just who were those guys?"

"Rebellion."

Ikki's eyes widened at Arisuin's unhesitant reply. Rebellion was the world's most infamous crime syndicate. They called Blazers humanity's new chosen breed while deeming all others inferior, and they wanted to destroy society so they could build their own paradise where the chosen few ruled over the common people.

"How do you know they're Rebellion?"

"I was dragged into something like this where I used to live, and the equipment is exactly the same. More importantly, I'm worried about Shizuku."

"Yeah, but there's something we have to do first."

Ikki took out his student datapad and dialed an emergency number he registered beforehand. The call immediately connected and the familiar face of Hagun Academy's board chairman, Kurono Shinguuji, appeared on screen.

「I'm aware of it.」

Kurono immediately dispensed with explanations. It seemed the problem was already known outside the mall.

"That helps a lot. Then please give Ikki Kurogane, Stella Vermillion, Shizuku Kurogane, and Nagi Arisuin permission to use their Devices outside campus."

「Very well, I authorize you four to use your abilities off school grounds.」

"Great. That takes care of the most critical thing."

After Ikki finished, Arisuin spoke up as well.

"Chairman, can you tell us what you know of the situation?"

「The culprits are Rebellion, about twenty to thirty units, all equipped with weapons. Their objectives are ransom money and the goods and cash in the mall. Long story short, this is their periodic fundraising.」

"Have there been casualties?"

「A few people were banged up while escaping the uproar as it first occurred, so just some light injuries. Still no dead or heavily injured. According to images we took from security cameras, Rebellion has gathered about fifty hostages in the food court.」

"Food court… where we had our crepes?"

Ikki nodded.

"Yeah, that drafty plaza."

"I can reach that far with my *Shadow Walk*[9]. We can get there immediately."

"Then we'll first move to a place with concealment and observe the situation. Stella and Shizuku are probably there too."

Those two would never abandon the hostages and run away. They should've mixed in with the hostages while hiding their magic power.

「I think you already know, but the safety of hostages comes first. Don't go overboard.」

Acknowledging Kurono's advice, Ikki turned off the datapad to make sure it made no noise.

"Okay, let's move."

"Leave it to me."

Arisuin clasped Ikki's extended hand, and they immediately sank into their shadows. Connecting shadows with one another like waterways, Shadow Walk could only be manipulated by Arisuin, the user of *Darkness Hermit*, so Ikki held his breath and swam through like Arisuin did.

"We're here."

After swimming in the darkness for a short while, they reached a place overlooking the food court, the shadow of a pillar in the third floor atrium that gave a bird's eye view of the whole area. Leaving Shadow Walk and reconnoitering, Ikki and Arisuin confirmed Kurono's info. Hostages were gathered below, encircled by about ten people wearing the same black combat uniforms they saw before.

"Ikki, there."

In the direction Arisuin was pointing, Shizuku's figure was visible among with the hostages.

"But I don't see Stella-chan."

"...No, there she is beside Shizuku, the one with the large hat. She's famous as a knight so she's concealing herself."

"Now that you mention it, she's appeared in newspapers, right? But the situation's not too good."

"Yeah, the hostages are placed too close to the criminals. If we break through recklessly, the hostages will definitely get hurt. And besides, the number of Rebellion troops doesn't add up."

"Maybe they're acting in squads? We have no choice but to wait for now."

Even if Rebellion was acting in squads, the ratio of hostages to Rebellion troops was a little too high, which would be a problem for the troops if the hostages tried to escape. There might be opportunities using that oversight, so they decided to stay put and keep watching for the time being—but the situation changed in a way they couldn't have imagined.

「Don't bully my mother—!」

Suddenly, a boy around the age of a kindergartner rushed toward a gun-toting Rebellion soldier.

Oh no!

This was bad, but they were in no position to stop the boy, who screamed and threw the ice cream he held at the man, splattering the man with white. That couldn't possibly bring a man down, but it was more than enough to provoke.

「You braaaat!」

The soldier screamed in rage and kicked the boy—who wasn't even tall enough to reach his waist—in the face without hesitation.

「Ahh, Shinji!」

A woman in her twenties, probably the boy's mother, dashed out from the ring of hostages. Her abdomen was large, but she moved so quickly that one wouldn't think her pregnant, and she desperately moved between the boy and the soldier.

「Out of the way, woman! Don't butt in!」

「I'm sorry, I'm sorry, he's still just a child! Please forgive us!」

Another Rebellion soldier looked toward all the noise.

「Hey, what the hell are you doing!?」

「This fucking brat got ice cream on my clothes! I'm gonna kill him!」

「What's the matter with you!? How many times have I told you not to touch the hostages, dammit!? You can go die by yourself, but if you piss off Bischof-san he ain't stopping till he kills a dozen people. Don't get us involved in your mess!」

「Shut up! There's a lot of 'em so it won't matter if we shoot one or two!」

After that, the soldier turned around and pointed the muzzle of his rifle towards the boy and woman.

「No, please! Spare us!」

「You people might as well be pigs in our utopia, but you dare dirty an honorary citizen like me? You'll pay for that with your life!」

He put his finger on the trigger without any hesitation, and a lead bullet burst out from the barrel. To block it, the pregnant mother covered her child with her back. How futile. The bullet would penetrate the woman's body and hit the child behind her too.

But the bullet never reached the mother—because Stella's flames burned away even the specks of dust that flew from the muzzle.

Part 7

「It's best if I go out by myself… I would've been found out sooner or later… It's alright. If they know who I am, they won't kill me right away… That's why you should keep hiding and make preparations just in case.」

After stopping Shizuku with these words, Stella scorched the bullet by casting fire into its path, and the Rebellion soldiers fell into confusion at the sudden threat.

"A Blazer!?"

"Shit!"

They turned towards Stella reflexively and fired their rifles at her in unison. A storm of bullets shot forth.

"*Empress Dress*[10]."

Stella's feathered robe of flame vaporized all the bullets before they even reached her. But—

"Aiiieeeee!"

—the hostages started to panic because of the sudden gunfire. M4 rifles didn't have perfect accuracy. At this rate, the hostages would also end up being hit.

"Everyone settle down!!!"

A voice filled with dignity rang out above the sounds of gunfire and screams, and caught the attentions of everyone present whether they liked it or not. The hostages who were preparing to flee froze, and the Rebellion soldiers tensed up like scolded children.

"I don't want to fight you all, so please calm down and listen to what I have to say."

That takes care of the panic for now.

Stella felt relief as she spoke. In Japan, she was merely a high-schooler, but she was also a princess of the Vermillion Empire. She knew quite a bit about the international crime organization Rebellion, including how it organized its units. Even though Rebellion was widely known as an organization of Blazers, in truth the majority of its members were non-Blazers referred to as 'Adherents'. In the new world order that Rebellion wanted to create, the 'Apostles', who were Blazers, were actually a minority. Rebellion units were composed of this small group of Blazers commanding the non-Blazers as soldiers.

Every single Rebellion soldier here was an Adherent, so the Apostle leading them was probably somewhere nearby.

There should be only one Apostle for an operation of this level. I really didn't want to move rashly before he comes out though.

Showing herself in this situation was a major disadvantage. With that in mind, Stella once again cast a sharp glare towards the soldiers.

"I'll represent the hostages here and negotiate with your leader."

"W-What the hell's this girl saying!? You, how dare—"

It seemed like the soldiers hadn't recognized her yet, so Stella removed the hat she borrowed from a store.

"I am—"

"Oh dear oh dear~? It looks like we have one hell of a VIP mixed in here."

A voice interrupted Stella before she could reveal her identity. Looking toward that voice, she saw a man standing with a group of around ten fully-armed soldiers. When their eyes met, the man smiled, twisting the tattoo drawn on his face.

"Well, if it ain't the Vermillion Empire's second princess. Hehehe."

"Full black clothing and a gold-decorated overcoat… an Apostle's robe. It means you're the boss of these fools, right?"

"Hehehe, so pleased to make your acquaintance. Yes, that's exactly right. I go by the name Bischof[11]. The honor is mine, Princess."

The man—Bischof—bowed respectfully towards Stella, then turned towards his subordinates encircling the hostages and gave an offended expression.

"Hey, what the devil are you bastards doing? Can't you even babysit properly?"

"Tha—"

"Didn't I tell you to wait? Didn't I tell you not to touch the hostages? Didn't I?"

"W-We tried to stop him! But that bastard Yakin wouldn't listen!"

"Ya~kin. Was it you causing this mess?"

"N-No wait, th-that brat dirtied my pants and—"

"Huh!? You went nuts just because of… no."

Bischof turned around with a thoughtful look.

"…Hehehe."

"Bischof-san?"

"Ahh, Yakin. That must've been a disaster. I sympathize, really."

Bischof's attitude changed suddenly and he patted the soldier who had ice cream spilled on his pants, then pulled out a gun and pointed it at the boy who the mother was protecting.

"Rest easy. I'll balance the scales for you, my honorary citizen."

Stella spoke up in shock.

"W-What are you doing!?"

"What? Ain't it obvious, Princess? I'm gonna have this kid take responsibility for what he did. Responsibility is important, no?"

"Didn't you say you weren't going to touch the hostages!?"

"Well… that would be true if they stayed still, but this brat didn't. Ahh, he ain't an adult yet so we can't judge him too hard, but… what the kid did was still a sin. He trampled the dignity of this honorary citizen here, so he has to pay with his life. Penance for sin, forgiveness for penance, that's my motto, you see!"

Bischof suddenly squeezed the trigger a little. He was really going to shoot, so Stella didn't hesitate to manifest *Lævateinn*.

"Haaaaa!"

She leapt forward and slashed at Bischof. Seeing that, Bischof smiled.

He baited me!?

But no matter! She wouldn't give him time to summon his Device. Bischof was only holding a handgun. There was no way he could block *Lævateinn* with something like that!

Stella slashed the man along his gun, but—Bischof stopped that slash with only his index and middle finger.

"Wha—!"

"Hehehe, oh dear. You're fast and strong like the rumors say about A-Ranks. But alas, you don't know how wide and terrifying this world can be."

Stella couldn't hide her surprise. A slash with all her might had been completely blocked with only the fingers of one hand. That was no human technique; the finger and the arm should've been torn off together. Even if the slash had somehow been blocked, the arm would still be burnt by *Lævateinn*'s flames. But Bischof was completely unaffected by both force and heat, stopping her sword casually.

How? Faster than the answer could come, Bischof's right hand struck Stella's abdomen.

"Guh… uh…!?"

It was an offensive power that completely shattered her Empress Dress. Stella collapsed with just one hit.

How? He didn't look like that strong a Blazer…!

What was with this crazy attack power? Stella almost fainted in agony, but she looked up at Bischof and realized the secret behind his attack.

"Those… r-rings!"

Bischof was wearing a ring on the middle finger of each hand, and they emitted an ominous red light. They might look like simple accessories at first glance, but—

"This is my Device, *Judgment Ring*[12]. Its specialty is dealing with "sin" and "penance". The left absorbs all attacks towards me, while the right converts it into a magical power and returns upon my enemy. Hehehe, in other words, the stronger my enemies, the stronger I become."

"…I see, so I was hit by my own full power."

His explanation was credible since she couldn't stand up.

"You really shouldn't jump in when you don't know what power your opponent holds, dear princess~."

"…Aren't… you the one… who made me do it?"

"Hehehe, oh, you're quite right. Against the Crimson Princess, I really couldn't afford to be picky with my tactics. I'm so sorry about that. But well, I'm impressed. You, the princess of another country, could've stayed nicely hidden, but you chose to shield some brat. It's truly touching. Is this what they call noblesse oblige? I, Bischof, am truly in awe, so I'll tell dear Princess Stella a way to save that kid."

"What… way?"

"There's a very simple method, you see, a method of repentance everyone knows: apologizing after doing something wrong. But your highness, you must apologize in the kid's place—kneeling while stark naked! Ha ha ha ha!"

Part 8

At Bischof's demand, Ikki boiled with anger. He wanted to leap out from the hall above and cut the man to pieces, but—

...No!

If he did so, it would result in chaos, and the hostages would suffer casualties. He had to avoid that at all cost.

"Hehe... of course, I won't force you. How could I ever order a princess around? I won't mind if you refuse. But if so, I'll have this brat take responsibility as planned."

What a filthy man!

Ikki bit his lips hard to suppressing his anger. Bischof thought that Stella couldn't accept that demand, so he gave her the option just to humiliate her. But Stella's reply was exactly as Ikki expected.

"...I understand."

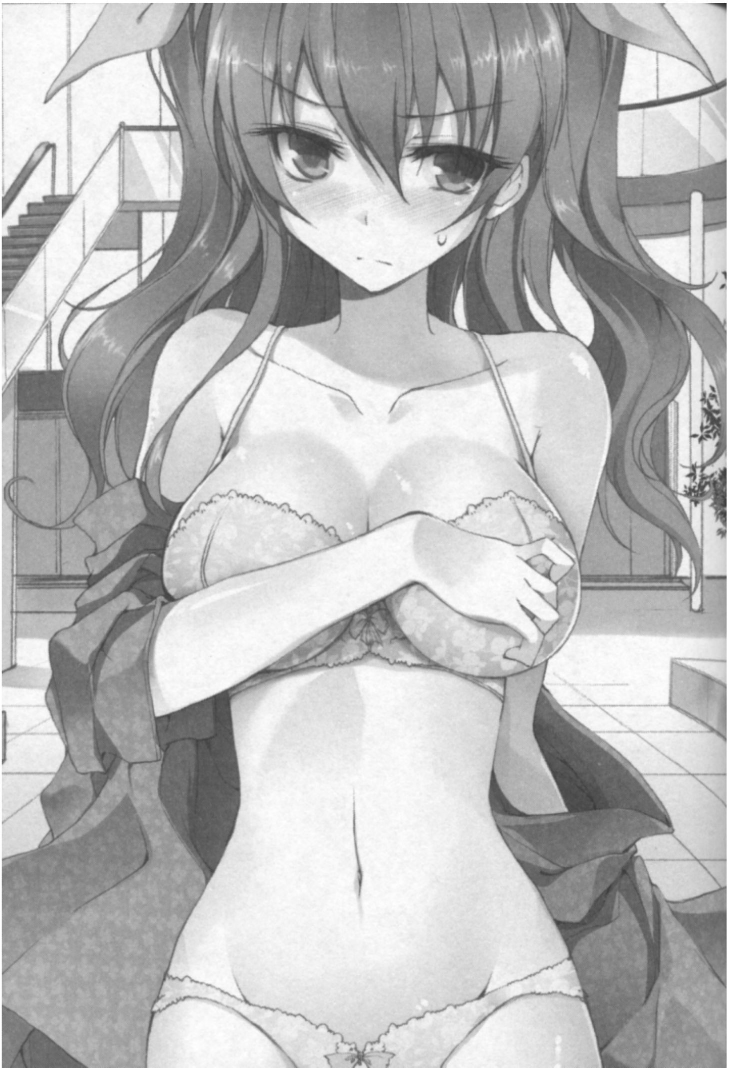
Stella dispelled *Lævateinn* and released a sigh of surrender while concealing her vexation.

"In return, promise me the hostages won't take a scratch."

"Of course. I, Bischof, am a man known for not breaking his word, so rest assured. Well, the ransom money and our successful escape must also be guaranteed."

"...As you promised, then."

After confirming, Stella stood up. Her knees were shaking, probably from the damage she took before, but her hands removing her clothes were shaking not from pain, but from agitation.



"Wow, haha! This is awesome, an imperial princess strip show!"

"What a nice idea! It's just like Bischof-san to think of it!"

"Yeah, strip strip strip! Hahaha!"

Stella's face was dyed red in shame. She had no choice but to expose her naked body in front of these scum, so she took off her clothes one piece at a time.

Her cardigan fell, and her beautiful shoulders were exposed.
Her skirt slid down to her feet, and her slender and alluring legs were bared.
Her blouse buttons came off one by one, and her small navel could be seen from the crevice.
And finally she only had her white-string undergarments left.

"Man, crazy. That's one hell of a bust. Is this really a high school girl?"

"I can't get enough of this!"

"Bischof-san! Can we take pictures?"

"You're too noisy, you horny bastards. Hehehe, the real show starts now."

Taking that unbearably filthy voice to heart, Stella's body trembled. At that moment, Ikki saw something glittering on Stella's cheeks.

Tears.

The moment he saw that small sparkle from her eyes, Ikki heard a ripping sound and felt something tear apart. That was the sound of his lips being bitten open, and the reason suppressing his anger coming undone.

—Stella!

But Ikki could not move from his spot.

"Ugh!"

He felt as if his body was tied to the ground. When he turned his neck, he could see Arisuin's Device *Darkness Hermit* stabbed into his shadow. Arisuin had stopped Ikki's actions with a Noble Art that arrests a target's movement, *Shadow Bind*[13].

"Calm down. What were you about to do, jumping in at a time like this?"

"But if I don't go now, Stella will…!"

"It's alright. I have a plan. Shizuku's making her move, so just wait a little bit."

Ikki couldn't believe those words.

"Shizuku…?"

"Yes. She's making a water barrier while hiding her magic power."

Hearing that, Ikki looked toward the hall again and tried to search for the presence of magic, but—

"…Is that true? I don't see anything."

"Well, of course. Shizuku might be inferior to Stella in overall scores but when it comes to magic control, she's unquestionably this year's number one. You could say Shizuku has A-Rank ability in that area alone."

Ikki's face showed clear surprise at Arisuin's explanation. According to that status, Shizuku could do things using a quarter the magic power that any other Blazer would need. Furthermore, Shizuku Kurogane was a technique-type Blazer.

"If someone of Shizuku's level hides her magic power, no one could detect it."

Arisuin showed his student datapad to Ikki, having apparently left it on but silent. A mail from Shizuku was visible.

「setting barrier now　will signal when complete」

It was a short message that she probably typed while not looking at the terminal as a precaution, but the meaning was easily understandable.

Shizuku!

Ikki called out his sister's name joyfully in his heart. As if responding to his call—

"*Shouha Suiren*[14]—!"

The water user Shizuku Kurogane raised a barrier to separate the hostages from the Rebellion soldiers. That was her signal.

Part 9

"What!?"

A barrier of water abruptly rushing upward—only a Blazer could create such a thing. Bischof considered the possibility that some other knight had been hidden, and shouted—

"If you won't stay quiet then we'll just kill everyone! All of you bastards, fire on the hostages!"

At Bischof's order, the Adherents aimed at the civilians on the other side of the barrier and pulled their triggers in unison. Those hostages, startled by the water and then the volley of gunshots, panicked and screamed as if they'd been thrown into a cauldron of hot oil.

But not a single fired bullet reached the hostages. Despite making noise like a crashing waterfall, the bullets were all stopped by Shizuku's Noble Art, Shouha Suiren.

Water had very strong impact resistance, and falling onto its surface from high up was like hitting concrete. For a high-speed object like a rifle bullet, hitting ordinary water would be enough to break it to fragments, and water infused with Shizuku's magic power had a solidity like iron. Nothing made of lead could penetrate that.

And Shizuku was not fighting alone. At the same time she used Shouha Suiren, Ikki invoked Ittou Shura. He jumped from the third-floor atrium, making a decisive surprise attack from above Bischof's head.

"Tch! They had people above too!?"

But Bischof was a terrorist who had struggled through many extreme situations. Noticing the surprise attack immediately, he quickly made a countermove, reaching out toward Ikki's *Intetsu* with the same left hand that had caught Stella's *Lævateinn* before. The *Judgment Ring* that seized every single attack as sin—his left hand activated the ability that had rendered Stella's earth-shaking blow powerless.

Ikki's sword was only faster than Stella's sword; it was several times less powerful, so it couldn't penetrate that ability. The surprise attack must have been a blunder. Ikki's blow would surely be taken as sin and returned to him as penance—if Bischof's left hand could capture Ikki's flashing blade!

"...Huh?"

In that instant, Bischof saw something unbelievable: his own left arm flying in a spray of blood.

No matter how well Bischof's left hand rendered attacks powerless, it had no way to catch an attack Bischof couldn't see, and what Bischof couldn't catch, he couldn't stop. Ikki swung *Intetsu* with a speed that far exceeded human motion perception, so quickly that Ikki's own body couldn't track. It was an invisible slash, one of Ikki Kurogane's seven original sword techniques.

"The seventh secret blade—*Raikou*[15]."

Part 10

「I'll deal with the smaller fish, so Ikki, please incapacitate their vulgar monkey of a boss.」

Ikki did exactly as Arisuin said. With the invisible slash Raikou, he cleaved Bischof's sin-stealing left arm and sent it flying, then with a returning stroke he severed the right arm as well.

With both Bischof's arms were gone, it didn't matter how strong his bluster was, though these injuries hardly stopped the man's mouth.

"Gaaaah! M-My arms! You fucking—"

"Such noisy rattling, huh?"

"Hii…!"

But Bischof withdrew his rant the moment he saw Ikki's angry face.

"Even if it looks bad, I went easy on you. After what you did to Stella, I wouldn't mind taking another limb or two. After all, with treatment in an iPS capsule, that kind of trauma isn't permanent."

Ikki spurned Bischof by turning his freezing gaze away, as if from filth. The hostages he now surveyed were uninjured, meaning his move had been a success.

**Thump* Arisuin patted him on the shoulder.

"You did it, huh?"

"Alice. Are you also done over there?"

"Should I say that I'm done? Maybe it's done, instead? That girl's quite amazing, I think."

Ikki frowned at Arisuin's unclear words, and turned—but he soon saw what Arisuin meant. The Rebellion soldiers were collapsed here and there, not a single one still standing. On that battlefield, he could see only one person's back.

"Stella...."

It was the Crimson Princess with her deep red hair swinging, her body clad in a dress of flame, and her hand gripping *Lævateinn* as it scattered flame. After suffering a critical strike and a disgrace she had never received before, Stella still made the first move and floored every one of the soldiers so quickly that Arisuin couldn't do his part. She had precise judgment with calm composure, and despite being humiliated so, she still controlled her strength. Ikki agreed with Arisuin's view that it was amazing, but—

Arisuin pushed Ikki lightly in Stella's direction.

"Let me report this to the people outside."

"Thanks."

She shouldn't have been forced to do something like that!

"Stella!"

Ikki ran up to Stella, and when she turned toward his voice, hugged her close.

"Ah! Hey, w-what!?"

Stella was confused and alarmed about being suddenly hugged, but Ikki didn't care. Right now, he knew he wanted to do this, so he tightly embraced Stella, concealing her skin with his own body. It seemed to put that gentle, heroic girl at ease.

"Sorry. If only I had come and saved you more quickly... then you wouldn't be embarrassed like this."

"Ikki...!"

Whether his feelings were coming across or not, Stella entrusted her small trembling body to Ikki's embrace. Ikki tried not to look at Stella's expression, but his embrace remained strong.

Not long afterward, Shizuku called out to him.

"Onii-sama."

"Shizuku, thanks. Raising a barrier was a big help. Was anyone injured?"

"Of course not. Do you think I'm that clumsy?"

Looking indignant, Shizuku extended to Stella the clothes Stella had dropped on the floor.

"I gathered them for you. You don't plan to stand around half-naked much longer, I hope."

"T-Thanks.... I'm surprised you'd do that for me."

"How rude. Shouldn't you be thankful that I covered for you after you rushed out so carelessly?"

"Ooh...."

Glowering at Shizuku, Stella self-consciously averted her gaze. But Shizuku—

"Still... I have a bit better opinion of you."

"Eh?"

"I couldn't save that parent and child, yet you put your life on the line for a complete stranger's sake."

"...I-It's not like I was trying to look good. ...But well, it would've been dangerous if your barrier hadn't been there. That technique was excellent...."

They had acted thoroughly hostile to each other until now, but whether from honest appraisal or embarrassment, Stella and Shizuku's glances were both unusually warm, and Ikki spied the exchange of some mutual acceptance.

It'd be nice if they could take this opportunity to get along better.

"Ah, that's right. Shizuku, can you cast healing?"

"Of course, but… no, you're not telling me you were hurt?"

"No, not me, him."

He pointed at Bischof. The man's bleeding was severe, so they couldn't leave him the way he was, and healing a wound by manipulating water was a skill limited to high-level water users.

"You don't need to connect the arm, just stop the blood. He'll become violent and troublesome again otherwise."

"I understand, Onii-sama. You wouldn't want this man's life on your conscience."

"I've rendered him powerless, but let's still be careful—"

"Dooon't mooove!!!"

Part 11

An angry scream erupted from among the hostages. Ikki and the girls turned toward the voice, and saw a young man in a red T-shirt thrusting a handgun at a middle-aged woman's temple.

"P-Please save me!"

"Freeze, all of you brats! If you twitch, I'll blow this hag's head off!"

Ikki tensed.

"Oh no, one slipped into the hostages?"

"...Hehe, hahahahaha! Hiding among the peasants ain't something only you kids can do!"

"Bischof...."

The criminal gave a distorted sneer with his tattooed face while blood gushed from both armless shoulders.

"Hey, the goth-loli midget over there!"

"M-Midget you say!?"

"Yeah you, midget. You said you do healing, so get over here and fix my arms! You won't tell me you can't, right? Hehehe...."

At Bischof's laugh, the middle-aged woman screamed again. If a gun was pressed to Ikki's temple, he'd probably do the same.

Dammit!

Ikki ground his teeth in anger. Ittou Shura was still active, but the muzzle was firmly pointed at the woman and he couldn't risk a discharge.

"Hurry up!"

"Onii-sama…."

"We don't have a choice. He's taken control of the situation—"

"Not at all."

A boy's voice resounded directly in Ikki's head, then countless rays of light passed beside him. **Swish swish swish** They were magic arrows shining with sky-blue radiance.

"Uaaaah!"

"Gah-ah…."

The magic arrows pierced Bischof and the hostage-taker repeatedly, this time leaving them helpless for sure.

"What!? What was that—"

Stella shook at the sudden turn, but Ikki had seen this before. He knew this voice.

This technique is….

"Hahaha, well well, it's sad having to lend a hand after all. I didn't want to steal someone else's achievement."

The empty space before their eyes began to sparkle, and then the image of empty air crumbled like scales falling. In the midst of that crumbling, a slender young man appeared holding a bow-shaped Device. Even Arisuin, who was able to sense Bischof's group from a distance, hadn't detected him.

But it didn't surprise Ikki, because stealth was this young man's special ability. Ikki knew because they were originally classmates.

"Kirihara-kun. It's been a while, hasn't it?"

Shizuya Kirihara. Last year's top new student, and last year's Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival representative. Kirihara calmly smiled at this reunion, and sent a scornful gaze through narrowed eyelids.

"Yeah. It's been a while, Ikki Kurogane-kun. You're still attending school?"

Stella and Shizuku made noticeably unpleasant expressions, but this person had helped them, so they didn't complain.

Suddenly, around seven girls ran out from the middle of the hostages, pushed Ikki's group aside, and rushed up to Kirihara. They were Kirihara's girlfriends who came with him today to visit the mall.

"Kirihara-kuuun! We were so scared~!"

"You had a frightful experience because of my disappointing juniors, didn't you? But it's fine now."

"Yeah, I had faith that you would save me."

"Ah, Kirihara-sama~. You're so cool. After all, you're such a strong knight~"

Shizuku coughed and Stella scowled at the extravagant praise from these dressed-up girls, and at Kirihara for basking in that praise.

"...What an unlikeable fellow."

"This is the first time we've agreed on something, right?"

The police who Arisuin had contacted rushed into the courtyard just after Kirihara cleaned up the situation, and they began restraining Rebellion soldiers and caring for the hostages. Ikki saw that the turmoil on their day off was more or less over, and as the tension left him, his body shook violently and fell over. His fatigue from using Ittou Shura had gushed out.

"Onii-sama!"

"Ikki, are you okay?"

"...A-Ah, yeah, I'm fine. ...If I rest a little, I can just about walk."

"Then you should sit down for a while, right?"

As Arisuin put Ikki on a food court bench, the police officer in charge called out and ran up to the four of them.

"Hey! You guys are the student knights who settled the affair, right? Will you come with me to the police station to make a report right now?"

"My my, it's not a good time, you know? We'd like Ikki to get some rest if we can."

Arisuin turned his gaze to Kirihara who was surrounded by girls, but—

"Should you be begging me to deal with a troublesome investigation after I cleaned everything up for you?"

—it seemed Kirihara didn't want to keep helping them quite so long. Giving that unapproachable refusal, he started talking with his female followers about going somewhere to relax.

"No, Alice. It's fine. ...If I rest in the patrol car, I think I'll recover a bit."

"Ikki, you're not pushing yourself too much?"

"I'm fine. Nothing was really hurt...."

Ikki stood up, pretending to be tough despite his deeply fatigued expression. After a moment, he turned in Kirihara's direction and bowed lightly.

"Thank you, Kirihara-kun. You really saved us today."

"I don't need thanks. The strong should support the weak."

Stella and Shizuku again took on dangerous faces at Kirihara's malicious words, but having Ikki rest was more important to them right now than snapping at this boy, so Stella took Ikki's shoulder and tried to guide him to the patrol car.

"But Kurogane-kun… are you still trying to become a knight with that pitiful strength?"

Stella couldn't disregard Kirihara's scorn this time.

"You… how dare you!"

"Stella, it's fine."

"It's not fine! I won't stay quiet after such self-indulgent insults!"

Shaking off Ikki's attempt to restrain her anger, Stella lifted his shoulder away and pointed a finger at Kirihara.

"You can say what you want, but Ikki is much stronger than someone like you! I've seen his strength myself! Do you even amount to the dirt under his feet!?"

The biting words Stella threw were only wishful thinking. Stella didn't know Kirihara's power, didn't know the hopeless gap between Ikki and that boy.

"…Haha, ahahahahaha!"

"W-What's so funny!?"

"All of it! How can I help laughing at this? Saying the Failed Knight over there is stronger than me… hahaha! Him, the coward who once ran away because he was too scared to fight me? That's a masterpiece!"

"Eh…?"

Ikki ran away from a match? Stella turned her head in astonishment and disbelief, but… Ikki didn't deny it. He stayed quiet, staring at Kirihara, and she couldn't read his response. But Stella knew such a thing was impossible, so she once again turned to Kirihara.

"You're lying! There's no way it's true!"

"Hahaha, because you're convinced he's stronger."

"Exactly! Ikki won against me, so he's no ordinary knight!"

"Oh? Then Vermillion-kun, how about we make a wager?"

"…Wager, you say?"

Kirihara switched his gaze from Stella to Ikki.

"As a matter of fact, a good way to find out whether you're right or wrong is already prepared. Kurogane-kun, I'm guessing your datapad's off? Turn it on and take a look."

Ikki quickly pulled out his student datapad, and the moment it started up, a mail receipt message began. The sender was… the selection battle executive committee! And the contents—

「The opponent for Ikki Kurogane-sama's first selection battle match has been chosen: Shizuya Kirihara-sama from Year Two Class Three.」

"That's right, your first-match opponent is me, last year's Sword-Art Festival representative. Me, Shizuya Kirihara, who holds the nickname 'Hunter'. Our fight has already been scheduled, so if I lose I'll take back everything I said today, and apologize like Vermillion-kun demands. But if I win… I want her as one of my girlfriends."

Naturally, Ikki raised his voice to protest.

"Kirihara-kun! Don't make such a ridiculous—"

"Fine. I'll accept those terms."

"Wha!?"

Stella easily accepted it, to Ikki's chagrin.

"Stop, Stella, this doesn't mean anything! I don't need Kirihara-kun's apology!"

"Even if you don't need it, I do. I have no position of my own while the knight who beat me is called weak."

Ikki didn't give up trying to persuade her, and Stella didn't give in. Neither were willing to compromise, so unfortunately Kirihara's wager was set.

"That concludes the negotiations, right? Heh, it's a boring match that I'll win of course, but maybe now it's a bit more worth the bother? Let's meet in the arena next time, Kurogane-kun. I don't think I have to say it, but if you stand before me with such shabby power… well, you better be prepared. The selection battles are real combat, not like mock battles. Fight hard if you don't want to be killed. Ha ha ha!"

Laughing loudly, Kirihara left with his girls. Neither Arisuin nor Shizuku nor Stella had positive impressions of Kirihara after that display of arrogance.

"Hmm. His face is good, but having such a crooked personality is terrible."

"…What an unlikeable feeling."

"Ha, no matter what he says, you won against me, so you can easily beat that guy. Don't you think so?"

Stella expected Ikki to strongly agree. But—

"Do I? For me, he's the worst possible opponent."

"Ikki…?"

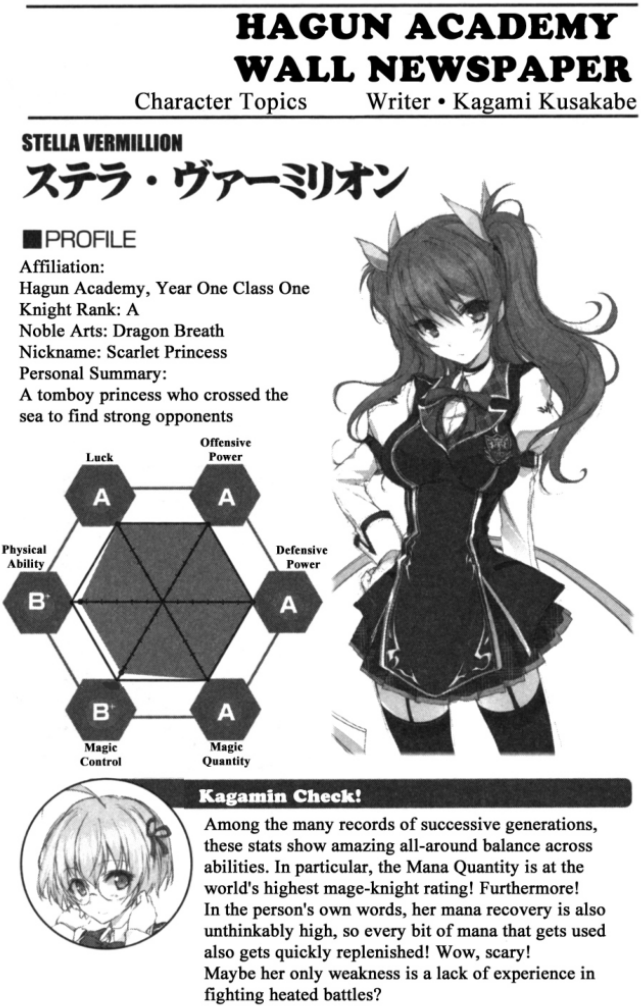
—the answer she expected didn't come. Unlike Stella, Ikki knew Kirihara's overwhelming Noble Art, so he couldn't make a firm promise. This fight… Ikki had a hunch it would become gravely difficult.

And so the selection battles for the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival began. Stella's, Shizuku's, and Arisuin's first matches were at the beginning of the week, on Monday. Ikki's first match with Kirihara was the next day, on Tuesday, and it would be Ikki's first official competition. It would be different from the mock battles up to now, a fight with real meaning. That debut battle was approaching before his eyes.

References

1. ↑ *Gothic Lolita*: A Japanese female fashion subculture which involves Victorian-style dress. The "Gothic" subset of Lolita fashion emphasizes darker colors in clothing and makeup.
2. ↑ *Onee-san*: "Big sister". In this context, it refers to a personality type based on an idealized young lady admirable for embodying elements of traditional Japanese femininity, such as gentle manner.
3. ↑ *Visual kei*: A fashion style that is associated with male Japanese musicians of certain rock and pop-music genres. It typically combines flamboyant makeup, hairstyles, and outfits with an androgynous appearance.
4. ↑ *Okama*: Male transvestite or homosexual. The term is also used to describe an effeminate man.
5. ↑ *Skinship*: An act of deepening or reinforcing a close personal relationship by engaging in intimate skin-to-skin contact.
6. ↑ *Thirteen Ice Cream*: A play on Thirty-One Ice Cream, Japan's name for its branches of the American ice cream chain Baskin-Robbins, based on its slogan of "31 flavors", one for each day of the month.
7. ↑ *R-15*: Japanese movies are rated by the nation's Motion Picture Code of Ethics Committee, inspired by the American rating system, into the categories of G, PG-12, R-15, and R-18.
8. ↑ *Darkness Hermit*: This uses the kanji 黒き隠者, *Kuroki Inja* ("Black Hermit").
9. ↑ *Shadow Walk*: This uses the kanji 日陰道, *Hikagedou* ("Shadow Path").
10. ↑ *Empress Dress*: This uses the kanji 妃竜の羽衣, *Hiryuu no Hagoromo" ("Empress Dragon's Raiment")*
11. ↑ *Bischof*: A German surname, meaning "Bishop".
12. ↑ *Judgment Ring*: This uses the kanji 大法官の指輪, *Daihoukan no Yubiwa" ("Ring of the High Judge")*
13. ↑ *Shadow Bind*: This uses the kanji 影縫い, *Kagenui* ("Shadow Weave").
14. ↑ *Shouha Suiren*, 障波水蓮: "Hindering Wave Water Lotus"
15. ↑ *Raikou*, 雷光: "Lightning"

Chapter 4: Debut Battle



HAGUN ACADEMY WALL NEWSPAPER

Character Topics Writer • Kagami Kusakabe

STELLA VERMILLION

ステラ・ヴァーミリオン

■PROFILE

Affiliation:
Hagun Academy, Year One Class One
Knight Rank: A
Noble Arts: Dragon Breath
Nickname: Scarlet Princess
Personal Summary:
A tomboy princess who crossed the sea to find strong opponents

Luck
A
Offensive Power
A
Physical Ability
B+
Defensive Power
A
B+
Magic Control
A
Magic Quantity

Kagamin Check!

Among the many records of successive generations, these stats show amazing all-around balance across abilities. In particular, the Mana Quantity is at the world's highest mage-knight rating! Furthermore! In the person's own words, her mana recovery is also unthinkably high, so every bit of mana that gets used also gets quickly replenished! Wow, scary! Maybe her only weakness is a lack of experience in fighting heated battles?

Part 1

Hagun Academy's selection battles for the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival started on Monday, one night after the Rebellion affair.

「It's finally time! On the schedule for our opening day, we have a B-Rank from the new students, a girl descended from that great hero Ryouma Kurogane—it's her first battle for Contender Shizuku Kurogane!」

This announcement from a member of the Hagun Academy broadcasting club was met with cheers by many students who had been following news on Shizuku, the second best of the first-years.

「Her opponent is a third-year student who performed in last winter's inter-school match and won against Donrou Academy's Festival representative Yamamichiyuki Azuchi. He's a C-Rank knight that everyone's looking forward to seeing in this year's Festival, Contender Shigenobu Suga! Having a young knight face such an experienced upperclassman, what a harsh debut! Will this supernova of the next generation show her strength!? Now, the beginning buzzer has sounded… what!? Contender Suga has already begun!」

A twin-sword Device crackled with electricity in Suga's hands.

"Too bad, 'supernova'! My ability is lightning, the one most effective against the water you use! It's too bad you got me as your opponent, but don't resent me for your luck! —*Hakuraijin*[1]*!*"

With a triumphant expression, Suga threw a slash of lightning at the unmoving Shizuku.

"Shouha Suiren."

Shizuku tried to defend herself with a wall of water. How could water protect against lightning? Yet Shizuku's Noble Art blocked the powerful current without trouble.

"What!?"

「S-Somehow, lightning had no effect! Commentator Oreki-sensei, what's going on!?」

「*Cough cough* That's probably ultra-pure water....」

「Ultra-pure water?」

「Yeah... everyone thinks that water loses to electricity, right? But no, when water does so it's because impurities like ions and microbes in the water make it conductive. Water becomes less and less conductive as it becomes more and more pure, until it becomes ultra-pure and forms a complete insulator that electricity won't pass through.」

「I see... oh? Then why don't other water users copy this tactic?」

「It's not that they don't, they can't. Completely removing impurities at the ion level is like sifting gold dust from desert sand. Only Shizuku-san's level of magic control allows her to perform such a technique. If an ordinary knight tries to copy this maneuver, won't his mind burn out first? *Cough* As you'd expect for the first-year runner-up... *guh*!」

「Whoa! This is the third time that you threw up blood today! A-Are you okay, Oreki-sensei!?」

「Aah, I-I'm fine, I'm fine. If I take some medicine I'll settle down. ...Aah, u'm feeling guud....」

「Oreki-sensei! Oreki-sensei! The medicine is making you slur your speech! Are you really okay!?」

「I'm fineeee.... It's just something for dealing with this disease, 'kay.」

「Sensei! You're getting completely wasted!」

What a chaotic discussion. Anyway, Shizuku seemed impervious to lightning attacks. What was Suga's reaction, now that he understood this?

"Damn, if that's true, I gotta take some distance."

But Shizuku gave a serene reply.

"And how do you intend to retreat?"

「Ah! How shocking! Contender Suga's feet are frozen to the ground! He can't get away like this!」

"*Suiroudan*[2]."

Shizuku shot a sphere of water thirty centimeters wide from *Yoishigure*, and the orb hit Suga right in the face, stopping in midair to cover his head. Suga tried to pull or peel the imprisoning orb away, but water wasn't solid, so he couldn't grab it or shake it off. He desperately sought air and clawed at the liquid, but only splashed and muddled it. Before long—

"…Gah…."

Suga's lungs used up all the air it had left, and when his hands fell limp, Shizuku finally released the watery prison. He collapsed in the ring, and at the same time, the referee made a declaration.

"Shigenobu Suga can no longer fight! The winner, Shizuku Kurogane!"

「The match is over—! Against an incompatible elemental attribute, first-year contender Kurogane has taken the win with an overwhelming difference in technique!」

Coughing modestly, Shizuku turned her gaze and returned a small gesture to Ikki as he waved at her happily from the audience seats.

"It wasn't such a big deal."

Then she turned her attention to the arena scoreboard.

…A suitable time for settling things will come soon enough.

Part 2

While Shizuku was fighting in the fifteenth training arena, more than four times as many spectators were gathered at the seventh arena where the foreign princess Stella Vermillion, this year's top-ranked newcomer who had already received a nickname from the student body, was having her first match.

"Gooo! Momotaniiii!"

"You're unbeatable in a close-range fight, ya know!"

"Show us an upperclassman's intensity!"

「What amazing encouragement from the cheering section! Contender 'Heavy Tank' Momotani's place among the school's top ten most popular isn't just talk! Now, will his signature move that has blown many knights out of the stadium appear today too!? That heavy charge from the rare armor-type Device *Goliath*!?」

Takeshi Momotani, a giant standing 190 centimeters tall and stout as a boulder, was Stella's opponent for her first match. Pressured by the screams from the cheering section and by the host's anticipation, he lowered his heavily armored body into a ramming stance with one shoulder pointed at his opponent—but after taking the stance, Momotani didn't move.

"What's wrong, Momotani!? Blow her away like you usually do!"

"That girl lost to an F-Rank! Someone like you has more than enough to take her down, yeah!?"

His friends and classmates jeered, but Momotani himself—

That's easy for you guys say, but how am I supposed to do this…?

—was cringing at the sea of flame spread over the ring. Stella, his opponent, stood in the center of that sea with a dress of blazing flame over her body, and the heat of her Dragon Breath was grilling Momotani inside his armor despite more than ten meters of separation between them. He understood for the first time the extraordinary energy Stella held. Fighting against such an opponent was like throwing himself into a furnace.

Stella addressed the unmoving Momotani.

"It seems you have better judgment than that noisy bunch behind you. This match is a real battle, and if you just dash in, you won't get off with illusionary pain. Keeping that in mind, you should think hard before making a move."

Whether because of his own hesitation or the reasoning he just heard, Momotani took her advice quite seriously.

"...I forfeit."

「W-W-What was that!? Contender Momotani, without taking a step after starting the match, has just given up!」

「Wahaha! How pitiful! Disgraceful! But wise~!」

At Momotani's decision, a petite teacher in red clothing laughed crudely from her seat at the commentator station, and said something that could be either insult or praise.

「What do you mean, Saikyou-sensei?」

「There's no way he could overcome that monster, after all! Haven't you been asking him to burn himself to death? He caaan't! But anyway, giving up before taking a single step is a great move! Ahahaha!」

「U-Umm, Saikyou-sensei, I think you should choose your words a little bit more carefully....」

The female students nearby were unable to let Saikyou's words pass. They wore tight, threatening faces.

「Wahaha. Oh no, it's getting super bad. I'm scared so I'm running away~」

Saikyou quickly fled the announcer station.

「Ah, wait, Saikyou-sensei! There are still matches left! You're leaving too early! Who are we going to get commentary from!?」

…That was some rather disordered match coverage, wasn't it?

Stella left the ring in amazement. On the way—

「Err… just now, we received news that the first-year runner-up having a bout in the fifteenth practice arena, Shizuku Kurogane, has taken a perfect victory over her opponent, third-year Shigenobu Suga!」

—she heard about Shizuku's victory. Well, she didn't think Shizuku would lose to that sort of opponent.

「But what strength! This year's freshmen top-seat and runner-up have completely shut their upperclassmen down! They've debuted in these matches without being touched! The new students this year really are something else! With them, reaching the summit of the Seven Stars might even be possible!」

Part 3

"Stella, congratulations."

Ikki greeted Stella as she returned to the dorm room after the first day of selection battles ended. Her response was flat, but from how her nose twitched, she didn't seem to completely disregard his greeting.

"Haa. Well, if I have to fight in this sort of competition, I should at least win."

"I guess I didn't get to see your match after all."

"I just torched something superfluous, like usual."

"But it's disappointing that I couldn't make it."

"...I'm the one who's disappointed."

"Eh? What did you say?"

"N-Nothing! We can't help that Shizuku's match was scheduled in the same slot, but next time come and watch my fight properly!"

"Sure, of course. Anyway, aren't you back a bit late?"

"The fight was a letdown and I didn't know what to do with my energy, so I went to the gym for a workout."

"I see. But it's really great that you and Shizuku, and Alice too, all of you won."

Arisuin's match had been held in the fifteenth training arena right after Shizuku's, and he beat a second-year E-Rank opponent in ten seconds. Though Arisuin described himself as disadvantaged in direct combat, his performance showed he was worth being chosen as the roommate of the first-year runner-up.

"I also saw Alice's strength in the fight against Rebellion, but he finds being the attacker disagreeable and kept his offensive ability secret. That sort of trickiness might be a bad match-up for you."

"I won't lose no matter who my opponent is. I mean… you shouldn't be worrying about other people."

"Ah, haha. I guess so."

Ikki returned his attention to the match he had been watching on TV before Stella entered. In that match was Ikki's next opponent, Shizuya Kirihara.

"Again with that guy's recording? You've been watching it over and over since yesterday, haven't you?"

"Yeah. I thought I should understand his moves as well as I could."

The recording was a piece of data that he begged for and received from the newspaper club president Kagami Kusakabe. It was footage from a first-round bout in last year's Sword-Art Festival. In it, Kirihara circled his opponent and shot arrows continuously. That opponent only searched for Kirihara in bewilderment until collapsing from blood loss, unable to fight back even though Kirihara was standing right there. Why? Because the opponent couldn't see him.

"A flawless stealth camouflage that masks its user's presence, *Area Invisible*[3]. That's the power of his Device, *Oborotsuki*[4]."

"It won't help no matter how many times you watch that boy's tactics."

Stella gazed at the recording scornfully, and Ikki understood her mood. The recording's content was vexing; instead of two contenders in a match, it was more like one player at a shooting gallery.

"However, that method is certainly effective. He didn't take a scratch in his fights all year. Kirihara-kun is strong."

"...But isn't it strange? That guy supposedly fought in last year's Sword-Art Festival, but wasn't able to become a Seven Stars Sword King. Then he must have lost, right?"

"In the second round. But that's a loss by abstention."

"Abstention?"

"Kirihara-kun didn't fight an opponent who could beat Area Invisible. His ability is strong, but wide-range attacks work well against him. Kirihara-kun can't fight people who have a way to strike the entire ring. For example, you can turn an arena into a sea of flame, right?"

"I see. Invisibility doesn't matter to an attack that covers the entire battlefield."

"Yep, so there's no question he'll withdraw from the fight if he's facing someone like you. Because he has this fighting style that's inappropriate for a knight, he was given the nickname 'Hunter'."

"…Hmph. That's not a very cool nickname. I don't have an opponent I can't win against, and with just a rebuke besides. In comparison, that boy is a total coward."

Kirihara was only strong as long as he was safe. Moreover his style inflicted unnecessary pain on his opponent by avoiding fatal strikes on purpose. It made Stella sick just watching it.

"But… I understand why you say this is your worst opponent."

"Right? He's my natural enemy."

Ikki needed a wide-range technique to defeat Area Invisible, but he had none. He certainly possessed superior sword technique, a tempered body, and skill in hand-to-hand, but all his attacks were short-ranged, and the scope of his offense was limited to melee. Kirihara's Device *Oborotsuki* was a bow, a long-range weapon, so Kirihara would always take the first move. And more than anything else, Ikki's trump card Ittou Shura could only be used once a day, with a strict duration of a single minute. It was abysmal against abilities that specialize in escape.

On the screen, Kirihara's opponent was being carried out on a stretcher. Stella, whose eyes might see something similarly tragic happening to Ikki himself tomorrow, anxiously spoke.

"It's okay, Ikki."

"You're not worried, are you?"

At his unconcerned response, Stella's face quickly reddened.

"I'm not really worried about you! I'm only worried that if you won't win, I'll have to be that person's girlfriend! Being your slave is the worst, but being that smug boy's girlfriend is even worse than that!"

"You accepted his wager on your own, you know? It's troubling if you make me responsible for it. After I told you to stop, even."

"Uh… but… you were being such an idiot, it was frustrating."

"Eh? But… what?"

"N-Nothing!"

Stella suddenly turned her eyes away from Ikki, but while her words were too childish, he understood that Stella wanted him to win.

"Well, I don't need Kirihara-kun's apology, but I also don't want you to see me defeated."

"Do you have a plan?"

"I do."

Ikki declared so without hesitation.

"I've already found a way to beat him."

Kirihara was the top-ranked newcomer of Ikki's generation, a tough opponent whose overly-strong ability made him the school's Festival representative despite being a first-year. But even so, Kirihara hadn't made it past the second round; how would Ikki take the summit if he stumbled such an opponent? Besides, the Sword-Art Festival fielded six of the best fighters in the school. His homeroom teacher Oreki had said the average knight fights ten matches or more, which meant the ones who go undefeated without withdrawing along the way might have to fight around twenty. If he was beaten here, perhaps he never stood a chance anyway.

But if he was beaten here, everything he endured would end up meaningless. He couldn't allow that.

"I'll definitely win."

Though Ikki sounded slightly different from usual, his strong words satisfied Stella. In fact, before Stella came back to the room, Nagi Arisuin had called out to her after his own match was over. Arisuin had conveyed to Stella a worry about whether Ikki was nervous over his first match, but this energetic attitude was probably fine. Stella understood Ikki's strength the most.

"So it's fine. You'll definitely beat that guy. You're already throwing down the spoon[5]."

"No, no, throwing the spoon is the opposite of what I'm doing."

Stella's Japanese was fluent, but her knowledge of proverbs and manners was dubious, like in the talk about seppuku.

"Anyway, isn't it time for dinner? I'm hungry."

"Yeah, I've already watched the video plenty, so let's go."

"Japanese people eat curry with pork cutlet at times like this, right?"

"...Err, no, we don't really have that kind of custom. Noodles as usual are fine."

Two people left the dorm room for the dining hall together, and so the first day of matches ended like a normal Monday.

Part 4

「Sorry, Kurogane. I can't stay friends with you anymore.」

Ikki was startled awake by a terrible dream. His hands were tightened unintentionally, and his palms were sweaty.

Why did I have a dream from last year?

Apologetic words echoed in Ikki's mind. He wasn't sleepy anymore, so to cool his head a little, Ikki descended from his upper bunk and left the room, being careful not to rouse Stella as she breathed lightly.

It's a little early for running….

The air before dawn was chilly, but since it was the beginning of April, that chill was comfortable on a sweating body.

"Really, I wonder why I remembered after such a long time?"

Though nobody was around to answer, Ikki still let that question slip out.

「The board chairman seems suspicious of anyone friendly with that guy.」

How long ago did this rumor start? When did he become a solitary student who couldn't take combat classes, with the disingenuous excuse that "he lacks ability, so it's dangerous to let him practice"? He was given no choice, and even if few people knew the staff's attitude for sure, everyone suspected it.

「Associating with Ikki will get you in trouble.」

If such a rumor got spread around, then of course people would keep their distance.

"That reminds me, it was right over there."

Ikki looked through a dormitory corridor window down at the courtyard, a plaza with a lushly growing lawn. Back when everyone was coming to believe those rumors, when everyone except his roommate drew away from Ikki, an unusual person called out to Ikki during lunch. That person was Shizuya Kirihara, the top student of Ikki's class and a superstar who had appeared in the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival despite being a first-year.

In truth, Ikki had already gotten a poor impression of Kirihara. Unlike the ordinary students who stayed away from Ikki and didn't pick fights, Kirihara—without condemning Ikki directly—would slander him with a purposefully loud voice in the classroom, spread unfavorable gossip about him to their classmates, and harass him in various other ways.

Why? Ikki didn't remember attracting Kirihara's enmity. They probably had no real grudge. With no one defending Ikki at the time, Kirihara had spread the idea that messing with Ikki is fine because Ikki was the type of unneeded person that can be found anywhere. Kirihara probably thought confronting Ikki was just a natural thing to do.

Ikki figured they had no reasonable business with each other, and it had indeed been a worthless conversation.

「How long are you gonna keep taking the teachers' scorn like this, when they won't recognize your real ability even if you suffer for the rest of your life? Now's the time to duel with me, right?」

If Ikki had a fair fight with Kirihara who appeared in the Sword-Art Festival, the teachers surely wouldn't be able to deny Ikki's ability, right? It was a proposal that should greatly appeal to him… but Ikki couldn't accept. Though they were in school, fighting without a teacher's permission would be punished. If Ikki was even a little bit tainted by scandal, the board chairman who was connected to the Kurogane household would expel him with glee. And that was

Kirihara's goal. Back then, there had been signs of many teachers at the plaza, all of them cronies of the board chairman who always treated Ikki badly. Maybe they were behind Kirihara's actions. Understanding that, Ikki turned down the offer and started to leave. But then—

「Don't say that. I'm worried about you as a classmate.」

—Kirihara prepared to shoot with his Device, *Oborotsuki,* at Ikki's turned back. Ikki disregarded the challenge, and didn't summon his own weapon.

"I was really amazed at the time, huh...."

He was surprised that despite Kirihara's conduct, nobody reprimanded Kirihara at all, neither the students nearby nor the teachers who were waiting to see what happened. Back then, Ikki hadn't even realized his own position, didn't know how crushing his isolation was.

The teachers seemed to expect Ikki being deceived by Kirihara's provocation, because expulsion was surely the best outcome for the Kurogane house's request that Ikki not become a professional mage-knight. Ikki knew that of course, and he had taken many such attacks without ever summoning *Intetsu*. If he were to avoid them, someone might interpret his evasion as fighting intent, so he didn't even try to dodge.

Ikki allowed Kirihara's arrow to hit him, and blacked out... so evidence of his refusal to fight was captured by a school security camera, and he wasn't blamed for the affair. But Kirihara's punishment was only a stern warning and a forced apology. It was clear that the board chairman's party had exchanged a secret agreement with Kirihara beforehand.

"Thinking back over it, what a worthless year, huh?"

The harassment didn't stop after that one time, but gradually grew more malicious. There were many students who made Ikki's life miserable, and little by little the atmosphere they, the teachers, and Kirihara's group created piled up—before long, even the last person who had been Ikki's friend, the boy who was Ikki's roommate, turned away with a painful expression. Ikki hadn't voiced any anger, but clearly remembered the regret that had almost burst out. After that, they stopped speaking to each other. If the boy started a conversation, Ikki probably wouldn't have been able to ignore him. Since he didn't, Ikki ignored him diligently. The boy advanced in grade before long, so Ikki who was repeating the year didn't see him anymore, but—

"But I wonder why I had this dream after such a long time?"

It was already done and over with, and Ikki didn't care enough about it to be recalling it in his dreams. This must've been from talking with Kirihara after all.

Well, there's no need to ponder it, right?

It had nothing to do with the present. That board chairman was gone, and nobody was hindering Ikki. Only his own efforts decided the future now.

Suddenly, a warm light shined on the side of Ikki's face. Bright golden light blazed forth from the dormitory window and the townscape's silhouette beyond. Squinting at the light that announced the break of day, Ikki certainly felt it.

It was the beginning of the H-block matches. Today, everything of Ikki Kurogane would be tested.

Part 5

School continued as usual in the morning, and the selection battles were conducted from the afternoon until evening. Ikki's turn was at one-thirty. It was one of the early slots, a delicate time when lunch was still stuffed firmly in his stomach, and on that day he finished the gelatin provided by the school cafeteria. Along with Stella, Shizuku, and Arisuin, he was going to his match at the fourth training arena.

The time was already one o'clock. In the ring, the match before Ikki's was already being held. The people appearing needed to come early and wait on standby, but there were still twenty minutes left. Sitting in the audience seats for a while and viewing other people's fights together with friends was probably not a bad idea. Both Stella and Shizuku intended to do so. Not Ikki, though.

"I'm going to the waiting room a little bit early."

Stella blinked.

"Eh? You won't watch some matches here?"

"No, right now I want to concentrate on my own."

Ikki was already readying himself against Kirihara. He'd hate to disturb his mindset by watching someone else's match.

"Well, I'm off."

"Please triumph, Onii-sama. I have faith in you."

"Since you told me yesterday that you'll win, I won't forgive a poor showing."

"Be careful, okay?"

Returning a nod to each of those three different forms of encouragement, Ikki headed toward the waiting room.

Part 6

"Ikki Kurogane of Year One Class One? Your identity has been confirmed. Here's your student datapad."

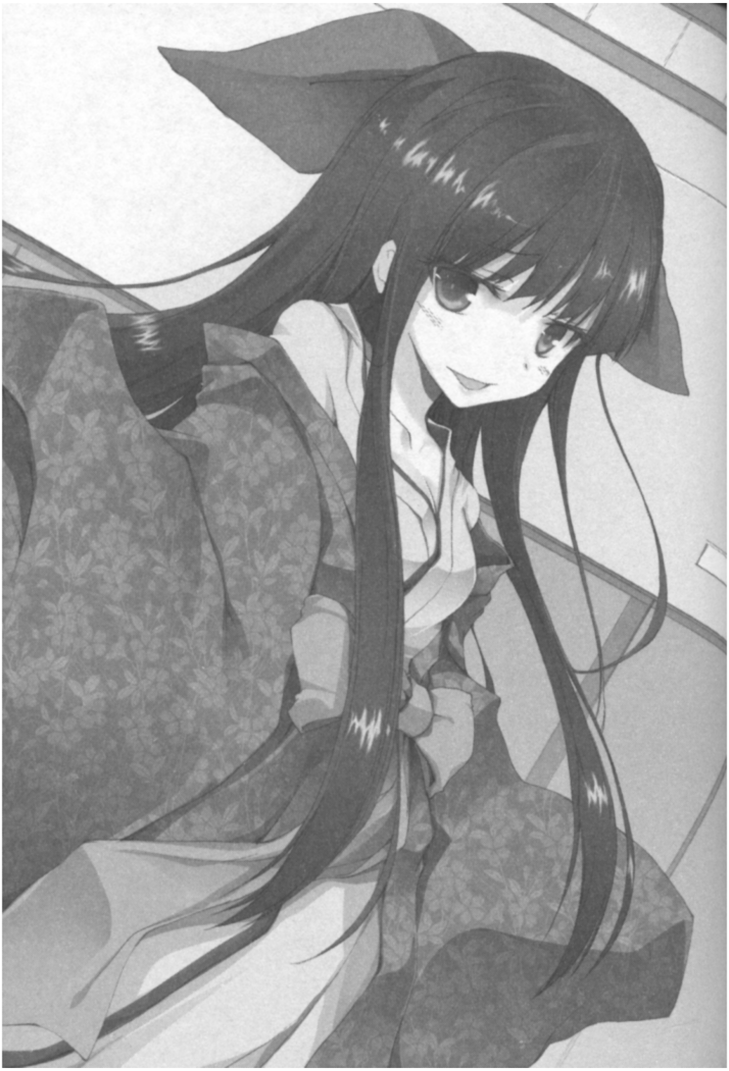
The female receptionist in front of the waiting room completed the match formalities using her computer terminal.

"Since the first match is ending, I'll explain the rules for the selection battles. These battles use the same actual-combat format as the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival: one-on-one duels. There is no time limit. Surrender is allowed. Because it's actual combat, illusionary form is not used, so there is a possibility that the lives of participants will be endangered. Various staff personnel are present in the arena to forestall such incidents, and depending on the situation the referee may also stop the match, but nevertheless absolute safety is not guaranteed. Taking that risk into account, if you are determined to participate, press the 'Yes' button on the datapad's display. If not, please press the 'No' button. However, once you press 'No', you can no longer join the selection battle entry lottery, so please choose carefully."

Ikki pressed "Yes" without hesitation.

"Wahaha, a lad who makes a prompt decision, I see—♪"

A playful voice made Ikki turn around, and standing there behind him was a petite girl in a blossom-patterned white kimono and an eye-catching red haori. An innocent girl's features with a loose kimono that didn't match her height—this combination gave an awfully childish impression, but Ikki knew she wasn't a student.



"Nene Saikyou-san... am I right?"

"Ohh? You know my name?"

"Everyone in this school knows last year's Japanese Olympics representative and the KOK top league contender, the 'Yaksha Princess'[6]."

"KOK" was the "King of Knights", a contest between Blazers in hand-to-hand combat. It was the most popular sport in the world, said to make three trillion yen in broadcast revenue[7] in one year. All mage-knights knew of this person, who was both a star at that level and an active celebrity athlete called the strongest in the Asian-Pacific. Later on, she became a topic on many talk shows because she had quite an infamous private life. Well, that wasn't something he should mention to the person herself, but….

"But why is an active professional in a place like this?"

"Of course, I came to meet you, Ikki Kurogane...-kun."

"Me?"

"Yeah, yeah. Since Kuu-chan... ah, that's Shinguuji. I was wondering what kind of F-Rank person Kuu-chan would have her eyes on, and came here to see."

"Ohh… but I thought the academy is strictly barring entrance to outsiders."

"Not a problem. After Kuu-chan fired the useless teachers, she didn't have enough aides, so I came to help in my free time since we're of the same generation. I've received a legitimate teaching appointment."

"I see, is that how it is?"

Ikki instantly understood, because he also knew the former board chairman's teaching staff had been massively restructured at the time Kurono took her position. Saikyou nodded.

"After that, well, I wanted to take the opportunity to sample some delicious-looking young men… wait, maybe I shouldn't put it like that? Ignore what I just said."

"I-I didn't hear anything."

"Wahaha. I like tactful men, lad. I like gallant men too. A strong, prompt decision is very attractive. All matches before high school require illusionary form, so a lot of kids panic when their schools turn into splendid execution grounds, right?"

Actual combat was always accompanied by bloodshed. Even in KOK league battles, it wasn't rare to see arms and legs cut off and sent flying. Such injuries were recoverable via the use of iPS capsules, but the spectacle of severed limbs was still devastating. New students would naturally become scared by such images. Ikki shook his head, though.

"I've known about all that ever since I first decided to become a mage-knight."

"It's human nature to lose your nerve even if you know it. Still, your courage is worthy of the only one Kuu-chan has set her eyes on, huh? And looking closely, you have a wonderfully cute face. Isn't that right, lad?"

At that moment, the meter of distance between Ikki and Saikyou vanished.

"Eh—"

Ikki was surprised that someone had gotten so unexpectedly close. Saikyou had gracefully flattened herself against his chest, and was now turning her eyes up at him seductively.

"How about a special lesson tonight in my room—"

"You bitch, what are you doing to my student?"

A threatening voice came from over Saikyou's head. Its owner was a scowling woman in a suit, the board chairman Kurono Shinguuji.

"Whoa, what a surprise! Stop it, Kuu-chan, standing behind me so suddenly. I might've killed you before I realized who it was."

"Could you kill me if you tried? Leaving that aside, what are you doing here? You were supposed to provide commentary and supervision in the fourth training arena, right?"

"Ah, yeah, but the match was tiresome so I had some free time. I just came over a bit to inspect Kuu-chan's favorite, and maybe take the chance to pluck a flower."

"I-It's not like he's my favorite!"

Kurono seemed a little bit embarrassed as she struck the shorter Saikyou's whorl of hair with a thump, and Ikki averted his gaze from the unusual expression she made.

"Sorry, Kurogane. I've disturbed your concentration with a strange quarrel."

"N-No. I was a little bit surprised, but I'm fine."

"She's heading back right now, so don't worry about her nonsense. Hey, return to your station, you walking public indecency!"

"Yeah yeah, I get it, I get it, so don't pull on my clothes! I see your point already!"

Kurono pulled Saikyou away, her effort making a dragging sound across the floor. As Ikki watched them go, Kurono gave one last message over her shoulder.

"I said this some time ago, but don't go overboard, because tonight is a celebration party with everyone."

Her words implied that he would win.

"Wahaha. It can't be helped if plans have been made, right? Too bad, too bad. If that's how it is, show me an entertaining fight. Your match is one I'm watching over."

A slender index finger came out of Saikyou's long sleeve and pointed at Ikki. Saikyou floated a giggle and left together with Kurono, her single-toothed clogs clopping.

How serious was any of that…? What an unreadable person.

However, his body felt only her strength.

A moment ago, she leaned herself on me before I knew it.

Ikki had never felt that before, that uncomfortable experience of someone getting close without him being able to react. It was probably some kind of classical martial art, perhaps a variety of footwork from an ancient Japanese martial lineage. He didn't know exactly what kind of trick it was, but—

"…Uh, it's no good if I don't concentrate on the match in front of me right now."

Short footwork that uses eye-to-eye contact with an opponent to make distance hard to measure. It was an interesting technique, but there was probably no way to practice it at the moment, so he had to suppress his interest for now and continue preparing for his important match.

Focusing on his preparation, Ikki stepped into the waiting room. It had several lockers and benches, plus full-length mirrors affixed to the walls, and was otherwise a rather dreary space with nothing to see. However, inside the room was also a small door that released an odd pressure. Beyond that door, the stage of his formal debut battle was waiting.

I've arrived at last, huh?

Seven Stars Sword King. The road leading to the summit as a student knight. That beginning step. Coming here… lots of things had happened. Family, time, friends… he had lost many things. Nevertheless, he continued to walk forward without giving up, and arrived at this moment. Beyond this door, his fight with Kirihara awaited him. Had any of his pain and sacrifice been meaningful? Now was the time to have his answer, but—

Ba-bump

"Eh—"

His heart suddenly jumped.

W-What… is this?

His field of vision was shaking. Colors were blurring like paint in water, and he felt sick. Was something happening to his body? He didn't know. He didn't know, but his throat was terribly thirsty. Water. If he didn't drink some water—with that thought, Ikki opened the cap to a plastic bottle he brought in. However, his hand didn't move as he wished, and the bottle fell onto a bench. The cap rolled. Water spilled. His shoes got wet. If he didn't wipe it off. With what? With what? No, before that, his throat was—

「First-year Ikki Kurogane-kun. Second-year Shizuya Kirihara-kun. Your match is now starting, so please come to the entrance.」

The announcer dragged Ikki's awareness back to the surface of his turbulent thoughts. When he looked at the clock in confusion, the time was one-thirty. Even though he came early—

The heck, how many minutes was I standing here...

"Kuh…."

No way, was I that nervous…?

Settle down. Settle down. Ikki regained control of his heart, being mindful of himself. He had already seen through his opponent's trick in the video. He had analyzed the strength his enemy used for shooting, the angle of the shots, and the expected maneuvers afterward. He had already developed a way to break Kirihara's Noble Art, Area Invisible. He had trained his counter-strategy through many simulations.

It was fine to be nervous, and fine to win too. If he won, the hardships he had put up with so far would be vindicated, because they wouldn't be pointless—!

With that strongly in mind, Ikki subdued his jumping heartbeat and went to open the door to the ring.

Part 7

「Okay, the third match has ended! It's finally today's fourth match, and amazing people have entered! Hey, aren't a ton of people watching this match!? Continuing the live coverage is me, Tsukuyomi from the broadcasting club, and in charge of commentary is Nene Saikyou-sensei! Now, let's introduce the contenders! First is the previous year's top-seated new student who appeared in last year's Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival. He achieved the amazing feat of destroying Bunkyoku Academy's third-year representative, who was considered most likely to win the championship, in a crushing match during the first round! Claiming he'll win against any opponent he can beat, he's seized perfect victories in both regular and inter-school fights, earning him the nickname "Hunter"! He's the highest leading challenger for the Sword-Art Festival representative position, second-year contender Shizuya Kirihara!」

Kirihara, who was standing in the ring, raised one hand. In response, high-pitched cheers erupted from the spectator stands.

「As you'd expect of Contender Kirihara's good face and figure, he has extraordinary popularity with the girls!」

「Me, eh, my tastes go toward a little more wild—」

「I'm not listening to Saikyou-sensei's tastes.」

「Izzat so?」

Holding a grudge against Saikyou for escaping and abandoning the job, Tsukuyomi gave Saikyou the cold shoulder as she introduced Kirihara's opponent.

「Now, facing the Hunter is an F-Rank knight! But don't make light of him, because he's no ordinary F-Rank! Just about everyone here already knows that this competitor has somehow won in a mock battle with that A-Rank knight, the "Crimson Princess" Stella Vermillion, as his opponent! Was the strength shown in that recording the real thing!? Or is he, as we thought, just an ordinary "Worst One"!? Now's the time to make this mysterious power clear! It's the first-year contender Ikki Kurogane!」

Ikki lightly saluted the audience.

What an amazing number of people.

Fighting for the first time in front of such an audience was somehow very agitating, and Ikki felt a distance between his body and spirit as if someone else had entered the ring. His awareness was stuck in a white haze, and he couldn't assemble thoughts well. As Ikki stood bewildered, Kirihara addressed him.

"I can't believe you actually came out. Even though you did the smart thing in the past and ran away from my challenge."

"…That's already an old story."

"Really? Well, whatever you say. But now that you're on this stage… have you prepared yourself?"

"We're already standing here. Do you need to ask?"

"Ha, sweet."

After lightly bantering, the two duelists took their stances.

"Come forth, *Intetsu*."

"Time to hunt, *Oborotsuki*."

Both parties summoned their Devices. Ikki called a black steel katana to his right hand, and Kirihara took a green bow.

「And now, today's fourth match. Begin!」

The starting signal for the match came. And at the same time, Kirihara's body disappeared from the stage.

「Ooh! It's suddenly out, Area Invisible! Using this, Contender Kirihara can't be seen by the naked eye!」

「What a bothersome ability~. It can't be dealt with except by a wide-range attack.」

「Yes! In the first round of last year's Sword-Art Festival, the third-year from Bunkyoku Academy who fought with Contender Kirihara was the type to specialize in close-range single-hit kills, but because he didn't have a wide-range attack skill, he was defeated easily. Does Contender Kurogane have a wide-range attack!? We're not exaggerating when we say these things, you know!」

The hunter concealed himself in the deep forest, and from cover drew his bow on his prey. Seeing that hunter was already impossible, so there was no one to stop that shot, and from what should be empty air, magic arrows suddenly appeared and drilled into Ikki's back from his blind spot!

That was how it should have worked.

"Over there!"

「Knocked away! Contender Kurogane has used his katana to knock away the unseen enemy's arrow!」

「No, it's not over yet~. Look!」

As Saikyou said, Ikki hadn't just deflected the arrow coming from his blind spot. He immediately spun his body half-way around like a top, and ran in the direction those arrows were flying from.

Kirihara was certainly impossible to see. However, the arrows were different.

The location of the hand sending those arrows can be calculated from where those arrows fly. That's Area Invisible's weakness!

If one carefully determines the arrows' moment of appearance, it was possible to spy out this location. Ikki's strategy against Area Invisible was to calculate the opponent's direction and distance from the force and angle of those arrows.

"Take this!"

Ikki swung *Intetsu*'s blade, aiming at the place where the enemy must be. But the edge scythed down empty air, and from empty air, scraps of a uniform fluttered down gently.

"Ha, so close. Not only deflecting an attack from a blind spot but even guessing my position after I disappeared? That takes real concentration. Is this what they call seeing without sight?"

"It's hardly something that great."

Ikki returned humility to the voice that had become vague in both range and direction. However, unlike his humble words, Ikki was feeling quite confident.

This is good!

Before the match, his concentration had become disarrayed, but the strategy he worked out beforehand for dealing with Area Invisible was working splendidly. He was sure to catch Kirihara next time. Holding that strong spirit, Ikki concentrated in preparation for the second shot.

"Ooh, scary eyes. Making those eyes at a former classmate is pretty cruel, no?"

"It's hardly unreasonable for a match."

"Hmph. In other words, you're trying to beat me?"

"If not, I wouldn't have come here."

"...Haha, hahaha! Indeed it's just like you. I thought repeating the same grade might make you understand your position, but just like before it seems there's no way to fix stupidity. You haven't changed at all, still acting like you did in the past. So, so disagreeably."

Bloodlust filled Kirihara's voice, and Ikki knew it was time to focus on the second shot. Sharpening his concentration to take in all possible angles, he stretched out his perceptions and provoked an attack.

"If you think it's disagreeable, you should nock an arrow into that bow and shoot to kill. I'll brush it away entirely."

He'd use Ittou Shura the moment he perceived the next arrow, before Kirihara could escape. Victory would be decided here!

"Heh… a face with fighting spirit. Surely your sword arm is terrific. That's something even I'd acknowledge. But how sad, it's only so great as far as peasants go. For Blazers, humanity's new chosen breed, battles are all about ability! I wonder if an F-Rank who's not much more than garbage can break my Area Invisible?"

"We won't know unless we try."

"True enough. Then from now on, I'll do this."

In that moment, blood spurted from a hole in Ikki's right thigh.

"—Wha?"

A hot metallic pain raced through Ikki's thigh and stabbed into his brain.

"Guaaah!"

Ikki let out a cry in shock. But astonishment outweighed the pain.

What happened!?

Despite sharpening his concentration and checking possible lines for every attack, how had he just been injured? Holding together his disordered consciousness tightly, Ikki looked down at the hole which had been suddenly opened in his thigh. Where he looked, there was a spray of blood hanging unnaturally in midair, as if the blood was coiling around something transparent. Reaching out with a hand, he grasped something solid there.

"It can't be…."

For Ikki, this was the worst case scenario.

"Exactly. This year, the arrows I shoot can also be hidden. Do you understand? In other words, my attacks can strike invisibly!"

Part 8

Arisuin frowned as he watched the match from the spectator seats.

"This is bad, isn't it?"

"Yes. Onii-sama marked the arrows' flight, and thought of a way to deal with Kirihara. But… right now, that plan has been ripped apart. If he can't see the arrows, then forget about counterattacking, he can't even defend or evade…."

"As you'd expect from last year's Festival representative, no? What an outrageous ability."

Suddenly, Stella cut into Arisuin's words.

"No!"

"Stella-chan?"

"Area Invisible is certainly such foul play that even I was surprised, but that's not the problem! More than that… Ikki was acting weird beforehand!"

"Onii-sama was acting weird?"

"That's right! After all, why didn't he attack immediately after the match started!? He should know his opponent would disappear! Then wouldn't the instant the match starts be the deciding moment!?"

Hearing that, Shizuku replied in astonishment.

"You, haven't you learned anything from the terrorist matter the other day? Don't you think that carelessly rushing into a Blazer opponent would be suicide? Onii-sama's tactics are based on reading the enemy's tricks and stealing his idiosyncrasies. This was done to you too, wasn't it?"

But Stella shook her head.

"That's not it. Sure, Ikki observes his opponent and carries out a plan to win, but… the enemy this time disappeared, you know? He'd be constantly facing attacks from an invisible enemy. How badly do you think he's being pressured by exhaustion!?"

Shizuku also realized this upon being told. The mental strain from not knowing where the arrow was coming from, the pressure of staying alert continuously, such exhaustion was beyond the norm. For this drawn-out contest, Ikki's usual plan was terrible. Compared to that, seizing the opponent's position with a swift attack at the start looked hasty at a glance, but it was actually the best choice.

"Despite that, why…?"

To Stella who was grinding her teeth, Arisuin answered with the reason Ikki neglected a fast opening attack.

"It's not that he didn't do it. He couldn't do it."

"Difficulty's no reason not to try! Isn't Ikki obviously the sort of knight who won't give up!?"

"It's because he won't give up that Ikki's now giving out."

"No way! That kind of thing is completely…."

Not like him. Stella was going to say it, but her words stopped in her mouth. Did she really believe them?

「I'll definitely win.」

Ikki had been behaving a little bit strangely yesterday. Was he the type to use strong words like "definitely win" before a fight? His duel with her had been different, at least.

「But you know, it won't be clear if we don't fight it out.」

Despite aiming for victory, he understood the dangers of a match quite well. Could it be that Ikki's strong words had only been a frantic attempt to deny the pressure he felt from the possibility of losing?

Arisuin nodded.

"It seems you know what I mean. But don't blame yourself for not noticing, Stella-chan. It's hardly something you'd be responsible for when not even the person himself is aware of it."

"The person himself?"

"Yes, Ikki is too used to being wounded. He can't hear the cries from his own heart. If we consider how he struggled to get into this competition, it's certainly abnormal to struggle that way for as long as he has."

Ikki's hardships in coming here. Thinking of that, Stella lost her words of denial. No one understood him, no one helped him. Being denied opportunities for an utterly outrageous year… no, enduring months and years of the same before that. He believed that a chance would eventually come, but at the same time, that chance would also risk everything he endured. If he lost here, those bitter experiences would all come to nothing. And in that kind of decisive test, he faced a capable opponent who was his natural enemy—

His mind must be strained by a situation like that….

Acting normally was impossible with so many pressures smothering him. They would surely be impossible to bear.

Why didn't I notice that? Even though I'm closest to Ikki…?

Now that it was too late, she was regretting her ignorance. And as Arisuin thought, Ikki's accumulated stress had erupted at the worst time.

"Anyway… now that the arrows are hidden, Ikki's fangs won't reach this Hunter concealed in his deep forest. Both of you should brace yourselves. What starts here won't be a match, but a straightforward hunt."

Part 9

「…Cruel….」

It was ten minutes after the start of the match, and the voice of Tsukuyomi, who was providing live coverage, was faltering. In the ring, Ikki could just barely raise his sword with bloodsoaked hands. He had been reduced to this after Kirihara's invisible arrows destroyed his strategy. Yet the battle still continued, because while arrows had been driven through every part of his arms and legs, none had pierced his vitals. Was that mercy? No, everyone watching knew that it wasn't. This spectacle showed only a Hunter tormenting prey.

At the excessively lopsided match, Tsukuyomi tried to plea with Saikyou sitting next to her.

"Saikyou-sensei! There's no more meaning to this fight! I'm begging you, please end the match! We can't watch any more of this cruelty!"

But Saikyou didn't respond. Hiding her usually easygoing manner from just a while ago, she was staring at the ring with a dreadfully earnest expression, so Tsukuyomi continued her coverage helplessly.

「…Contender Kurogane admirably knocked away Kirihara's first shot, but from the invisible arrow of the second shot onward, he's been completely unable to react, and the match has proceeded hopelessly. But Contender Kurogane still hasn't surrendered. Maybe he has some kind of plan?」

Ikki laughed bitterly at Tsukuyomi's announcement.

Can't say I do. My strategy was shallow….

If he had thought about it, Kirihara would obviously be different between this year and last, so the opening moment when stealth would be least effective was the point where victory favored him the most. Realizing something so obvious so late, Ikki had become more and more conscious of his own mental strain and cracking composure.

It's just like Alice said, huh?

Thinking back, the dream he saw this morning might've been the cries of his heart that Arisuin mentioned, but Ikki hadn't realized it then. He was too used to acting tough, and this was the pathetic outcome.

…No, I can't be worrying over that right now.

Well then, what was the best option? What should he do from here on? How would he capture this invisible opponent?

"Heh heh heh. Not giving up even this late in the game… it's beyond amazing."

"…Withdrawing over just this much… would be even worse than repeating a year."

"Yes, yes, that's quite like you. Alright, to show a little respect, I'll give you a handicap. I'll tell you the place I'll pierce you next. Try and avoid it. Now, here I go. To start with, the left thigh."

"Gah!"

"What's the matter? Your reaction is slow. There, right shoulder!"

"Guh…!"

"Come on, try to dodge! The next one is your right ear!"

"Uwa!"

"Your movements are slow, Kurogane-kun! Don't you have some motivation? Put more spirit into it and run around! Here, left shoulder! Right thigh, right palm, calf, right knee, small intestine, stomach! Liver! Kidney! Large intestine! You'll die, you'll die! If you don't dodge well, you're as good as dead!"

"Guaaaaaaah!"

Ikki's knees finally collapsed as Kirihara's arrows started to fly at the internal organs in his torso.

"Hehehe, ahahahaha! So disgraceful and dirty! You have a miserable face on, don't you Kurogane-kun? Now now, keep fighting, keep fighting with a smile. You should have a reason to keep fighting, isn't that right? After all, Kurogane-kun, you're in this match because you want to graduate."

「Eh…?」

To Kirihara's unexpected words, the spectators felt their breaths seizing in their throats.

「H-Hey, what is he saying about graduating?」

「They said that not joining the selection battles doesn't impact grades, right?」

「Wait a second! I declined because there's no penalty for….」

"Ah, sorry, sorry everyone. It looks like there's a little misunderstanding. Calm down. The only one who wants to graduate is this guy. The F-Rank knight here, Ikki Kurogane-kun, has ability so low-grade and ordinary, it seems he can't graduate. Because of that, the new board chairman created an exception that if he takes the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival's championship, and becomes the Seven Stars Sword King, he'll be allowed to graduate."

That truth was announced to the spectators. Their commotion suddenly stopped, and—

"…Bu-AHAHA HAHA HAHAHAHAHAHA!!!"

Laughter that ebbed and flowed like the tide exploded from nearly every spectator in unison, and filled the fourth training arena.

「He'll graduate by becoming the Seven Stars Sword King!? Hey hey, you're not serious!」

「There's no way such a thing's possible for an F-Rank! The new chairman has gotta be kidding!」

「Pff, and that idiot accepted that promise!?」

「Hahaha, forgetting his place and coming all the way here is pitiful, ain't it!?」

「There's no way some guy getting wiped out at the first fight can become the Sword King, right!? Hahahahahaha!」

The Seven Stars Sword King was the summit for all student knights in Japan. Among the past generations of Kings, almost all of them were B-Rank, with the remainders being C- and an extreme minority of A-Rank knights. An F-Rank, a below-average failing student crawling in the dirt, could not possibly take that summit. By common sense, it could only be a joke.

But there were people who raised their voices to oppose the resounding scorn. They were Ikki's classmates.

「That's not true! Kurogane-san really is amazing!」

「That's right! We've seen it! We've seen Kurogane-san defeat five people wielding Devices with his bare hands!」

「More than anything, didn't Kurogane-kun win against Vermillion-san who's an A-Rank knight? An A-Rank that rarely shows up even among the Seven Stars Sword Kings? And he has real ability that he can win with!」

「I~diots. Don't you know? That recording was determined to be just some questionable thing from the Net.」

「You guys are the idiots. How can a princess participate in something questionable? It'd be impossible, if you think about it.」

「What the hell do you know? Did you know your F-Rank is a son of the Kurogane house, that wealthy and world-renowned mage-knight lineage?」

「That's right, that's right. That Kurogane family sent money to the poor Vermillion Empire and arranged a fixed match to support their kid. It's probably to distinguish him by having him win against a rumored prodigy.」

「Wha… that can't be!」

「If you say it can't be, then an F-Rank winning against an A-Rank is even less likely. We don't know why she's supporting that guy, but shouldn't you guys put some common sense into your heads?」

To that argument, the classmates supporting Ikki gulped down their words, leaving the arena filled with nothing but jeers.

「Someone who buys a win with his parents' influence, becoming the Seven Stars Sword King? Don't make me laugh, idiot!」

「You're garbage, a disgrace to us knights!」

「Aren't you reaching beyond your ability despite being an F-Rank!? You fraud!」

The Kurogane household fixing a match to support their own son? It was a lie based on unfounded rumor, probably the irresponsible fantasy of somebody on an anonymous online forum, tossed into the public consciousness where it had spread widely. There was no way the Kurogane house that continuously tormented Ikki would do such a thing, and even as a joke it was also preposterous at best that the Vermillion Empire's royalty would take a bribe from what was nothing more than a single knight family.

However, that fantasy had been taken as truth here, because it was comfortable. The majority of student knights were E- and D-Rank, envious people who constantly look up to those called 'prodigies' existing above them. To such E- and D-Ranks, the ones labeled F-Rank were few in number and lower than themselves, people safe to look down upon and abuse. They needed inferiors who they can surpass, who would call them geniuses and consider them blessed. Because they were resigned to never achieve feats like beating an A-Rank, they had little to feel good about, so they took a convenient fantasy as the truth and raised their voices in insults.

To those words, Ikki ground his teeth.

It's frustrating, huh….

Ikki didn't particularly want other people's evaluations, didn't particularly want anybody's approval. He wasn't concerned about who's going on about what at this point. But… it pained him that bad things were even being said about Stella, so of course his own worthlessness was irritating him.

"Oh, oh, it seems you're being thoroughly gossiped over. But what can we do? Everyone saw you dreaming beyond your means, and it made them angry."

Kirihara rubbed the insults in relentlessly, while Ikki hung his head and rested on his knees.

"How about I have you accept facts already? A small fry with something like body strengthening as his ability, continuing to fight in this place? Because of my Area Invisible, you don't have arms or legs left to use. This is reality, you know? A person's status is decided from birth. In the end, there's no truth to ideas like great effort coming before talent. No matter how bravely you act, it just looks ugly. Hey, doesn't everyone think so too!?"

「It's just as Kirihara-kun says!」

「You're really unsightly! Isn't it like Shizuya-kun's completely bullying you!?」

「Concede instead of relying on nepotism, you bastard!」

「You're brazen even though you're just a drop-out! How long will you show us this ugliness!」

The spectators moved together under Kirihara's direction, their voices becoming a heavy pressure that struck Ikki. The pain that reverberated in his creaking body brought Ikki's sense of powerlessness home to him.

Ugly, huh?

Indeed, it might look that way. Right now, he had no effective strategy against Area Invisible, a stealth that concealed sound, indication, odor, and shape. He couldn't even tell if an attack was coming until it was too late. What should he do against such an opponent? He hadn't the slightest idea, and at this point he was still upright only because of willpower. His will to not surrender was strained to its limit. If he gave in, the black mark of being defeated in a selection battle would be irremovable, but wasn't that still better than this bitterness? In the moment that Ikki's heart turned in a vulnerable direction—

"SHUT THE HELL UUUUUUUUUPPPPPPPPPPP!!!"

A scream swept over the jeers like a tsunami, and everyone turned toward the direction of that sound. There—

...Stella.

—the Crimson Princess stood, with scarlet pupils burning in outrage and a shower of embers swirling about her figure.

Part 10

Shizuku and Arisuin were staring in wonder, but why would Stella care? She couldn't bear it. Shooting a curse at the spectators with indignant eyes ablaze, she struck with words as if she was breathing fire.

"There's no way an F-Rank can win against an A-Rank? Isn't that something you people decided yourselves!? Limiting yourselves as unable to surpass a prodigy, you're only justifying your own resignation! You people are giving up like that for convenience, you know. But don't you use your resignation to deny Ikki's strength!"

That was intolerable, absolutely intolerable, because even though Ikki was inferior to everyone here, he kept on rejecting that resignation! If it was Ikki, he could withstand being sneered at by all, being cursed as trash, and being told that talent was insurmountable. He still continued to believe in his own worth. And despite that outrageous treatment, he obtained the strongest single minute that wouldn't lose to any talent. The brilliance of Ikki's spirit she saw that day was still burning in Stella's eyes even now. She hadn't thought as strongly about another person before. She hadn't admired another person as much before. Because Stella understood how high her pride was—

"He doesn't have anything like talent, but you people who cling to such petty things, there's no way you understand Ikki's strength! There's no way you can see it! You fools with your all-knowing tone, **don't make fun of the knight that I love**!!!"

"Stella...."

At such emotions gushing out, at the words that struck him, Ikki raised his eyes, and Stella's chest throbbed painfully at the emotions she found there.

"Why are you making such a miserable face…!?"

His expression was so frail it could crumble at any moment. Stella understood it, since Ikki was not yet as mature as she was. Rather, he was still so young that one could call him a child. No matter how he tried to be tough, no matter how he carried a steely determination—there was no way he could be so callous. He would be wounded by such jeers, and his heart would be injured by such abuse. Compared to that constant tormenting distress, it may be a merciful dose of reality for the *person* called Ikki Kurogane to lose and break down here. But still—but still…!

"Ikki, you told me, didn't you? That whatever other people say, you won't give up on yourself…! I thought if you were like that, I'd follow you wherever you go! So to these people saying whatever they please, don't make a face like you're giving up! I don't intend to lose to a man that weak! Because… the one I admire, the one I fell in love with, the one I always look up to, is the *knight* I continue to take pride in named Ikki Kurogane! —So…

"WHEN YOU'RE IN FRONT OF ME, ALWAYS BE AS COOL AS I KNOW YOU ARE, YOU IDIIIOOOOOTTTTT!!!"

There was a place she wanted to reach together with him—that was why Stella put all of her feelings into her scream. It wasn't just Ikki himself that believed in Ikki Kurogane's worth anymore. In that moment—

Pow! Ikki punched his own cheek with enough force that the sound could be heard from afar.

「Wha!?」

Everyone there shouted in astonishment at this sudden, eccentric act. What the heck was he doing? Under the questioning gazes, Ikki—

"Thanks, Stella. You really put life back into me."

—slowly, but with strength, stood back up.

Part 11

Rising to his feet, Ikki gazed at the red-haired girl who had scolded him. Large bright teardrops were spilling from Stella's crimson eyes. For whose sake were those tears pouring out? For whom was she grieving? Ikki wasn't so thickheaded that he didn't know. But even in her pain, Stella was saying this.

Fight.

Stella knew how hard and painful Ikki's path was, but she still wanted him to keep fighting.

So there's someone other than Ryouma-san saying that….

Ikki thought that if he lost this fight, everything he had suffered would become meaningless, and he was afraid to think on that loss. But he was mistaken. His goal of becoming a mage-knight might have taken great effort so far, but those days of trying hard and moving forward wouldn't become meaningless at all.

Because I met a girl who says that she loves the way I've lived!

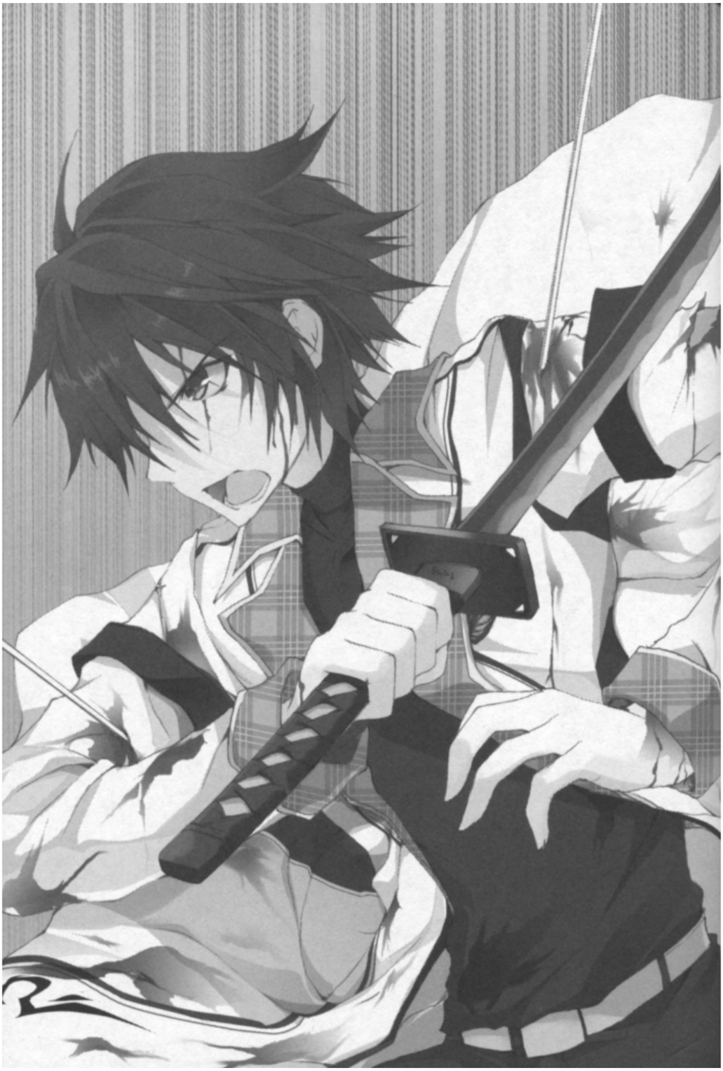
The instant he understood that, **click**, Ikki felt his heart and body joining together. His thoughts that were clouded by tension and dismay turned alarmingly clear. His body that was injured and bleeding was already on the brink of collapse, but it moved as he wished. Ikki's fighting condition had finally reached its zenith.

Then it was still too early, much too early, to give up. He couldn't, not yet. There was still something to try. Something that he, Ikki Kurogane, must do. He would move forward, no matter how punishing that was supposed to be. If he was defeated while using all his power, he could recover from his injuries and fight again, but….

But losing his nerve and running away, that would disgrace a knight for the rest of his life!

"Oooooooo!!!"

Ikki raised a war cry and fired himself up. From his flesh, from his blood, from every single cell, he gathered magic power and ignited it all in a flash. Ikki Kurogane's body shined with a blue flame that flowed like wind, radiating the glow of his Noble Art, Ittou Shura. And in doing so, Ikki declared his determination to finish this bout right here.



"With my greatest weakness, I'll catch your greatest strength—let's fight, Kirihara-kun!"

「Aaaaah! Contender Kurogane, who we could only think had already been defeated, has made a grand challenge! He's invoked Ittou Shura, the Noble Art which eliminated the A-Rank knight Stella Vermillion! Now the great technique which can be used only once a day has been activated—could he have found a way to beat Area Invisible!?」

With the sudden change in the battle that Kirihara was completely dominating, the tone of Tsukuyomi's live coverage lifted. Even she had been appalled by the Hunter's gruesome tactics. She had hoped for this turn of events, and sent Ikki her heartfelt encouragement. But alas, Ikki didn't have the solution Tsukuyomi was expecting. Area Invisible was perhaps the strongest anti-personnel Noble Art, not a technique that would be beaten by the strength of a Failed Knight in the first place.

And Kirihara also knew that.

"Catch? A 'Worst One' like you is going to catch me, the 'Hunter' Shizuya Kirihara? That kind of thing is beyond you. Aren't you boasting about something you can't even do?"

Right, exactly right. Ikki was boasting about something he couldn't do. Acting like that had surely been a mistake, and trying had only confused everything. Ikki Kurogane could accomplish only one feat since the beginning.

"You've already struggled in futility long enough, I think. I'm also pretty tired of watching something so uncouth, so it's about time I bring it to an end. …Hmm, which reminds me, I promised to tell you where I aim, right? That's right… the next one is—"

There was a certain bloodthirst dwelling in Kirihara's voice as he nocked an arrow on his bowstring. Perhaps his move would be deathblow to decide this fight.

"—to the crown of your head. If you don't want to die, dodge it, you held-back failure!"

A destructive killing intent shot invisibly, an arrow capable of even snatching away life, was racing directly toward Ikki. But—killing intent was inconsequential now. Of the arrow, there was nothing that could be seen, nothing that could be heard, so rather than try for the arrow, Ikki would only see what he *could* see, hear what he *could* hear.

Remember it—

The order he received his wounds, the direction—

Remember it—

The depth of his injuries, the angle—

Remember it—

Kirihara's words at that time, the voice—

Everything about this match was packed into those details. As if perusing the history of its fencing from the sword style technique, derive the enemy's process from the order and direction. As if collecting the school's knowledge from its swordsmanship, reverse-engineer the position from the injuries and angle. As if stealing the principles of its invention from its tricks, expose the patterns of thinking from the words and the voice. And then from everything there, investigating the previous degree of piercing's tendency, the personality, technique, design, by integrating, analyzing, understanding, exhausting data on all kinds of things—grasp everything about the person called Shizuya Kirihara!

There was no reason he couldn't do it. It wasn't difficult. Because all along, since long ago, Ikki Kurogane had fought that way!

In that instant, the arrow shot from *Oborotsuki* bit into Ikki. The place it pierced… was not the crown of the head, but the heart. Yes, Kirihara had set a trap into the last blow with a Hunter's composure and cool-headedness. His opponent was already in a hopeless situation, but just in case none of the injuries had occurred, he had shot an arrow at Ikki's heart while saying he was aiming at Ikki's head. A feint in addition to invisibility, his attack permitted no evasion. And exactly as the Hunter planned, the invisible killing intent pierced Ikki's heart—

"…Oh?"

That sound spilled out from Shizuya Kirihara's mouth at the inexplicable sight before him, and his mind went blank. He had sent an arrow of certain death that couldn't be avoided or blocked, but—Ikki's left hand had grabbed it, stopping it on the verge of penetrating Ikki's chest.

"H-How...."

How was it possible? Did such a thing really happen? To the astonished Hunter who was confronting a reality beyond his comprehension, his red-soaked prey coughed and said—

"...As I thought, there's no way you'd tell me the truth."

"What... are you saying—!?"

In that moment, Kirihara shuddered as if a worm had burrowed into his back. Ikki's eyes, without the slightest wandering, were staring him down even though he should be imperceptible.

"It... can't be...."

He had never experienced this, and icy sweat was pouring from all over his body. A chill crept up his spine, and his limbs trembled with a clatter. In Kirihara's swaying field of vision—

"...Yeah, I caught it. And I won't let you get away again."

—the bloodstained knight before him laughed weakly.

Part 12

「W-W-What happened—!? Contender Kurogane just caught the arrow that he shouldn't be able to see! What the heck is going on!? Even I, reporting live on location, still can't find Contender Kirihara! Area Invisible, the perfect stealth, is still going strong, but the images from our camera are being delivered now… and they reveal that Contender Kurogane reacted to the arrow flying at him! Is he seeing what we can't!?」

「Aha, wahahaha! Are you serious!? That guy really did it!」

Saikyou, who was also giving commentary to the arena, abruptly clapped her hands and gave a resounding laugh.

「Saikyou-sensei? Did you just figure something out!?」

「Heh heh heh…! Yeah, I figured it out. It's exactly as it looks. Area Invisible is already useless.」

Kirihara countered Saikyou's words reflexively.

"D-Don't be ridiculous! My Area Invisible is unbeatable! There's no way this F-Rank garbage has seen through it!"

「Ahaha. Yeah, that's right. That's also what I think. Kiri-yan's[8] Area Invisible is the strongest Noble Art against individual fighters. It's fine to be confident about it, because after all, Area Invisible can't be seen through. The thing that's been seen through is… the Hunter himself.」

"What the hell does that mean!?"

「Oh goodness, you're exceptionally dull, aren't you Kiri-yan? Haven't you seen the fight between the princess and Kuro-bou[9]? At that time, Kuro-bou saw and stole the princess's Imperial Arts, but stealing a sword technique isn't an ordinary feat like imitating a style. From something like a style or swordsmanship, the accumulated history is studied, taking the ideas arrived there, and exposing and returning with the principle of its foundation. That's what we call stealing a sword technique. And just now, he did the same exact thing to you. During the fight, he stole *the person called Shizuya Kirihara*. Isn't that right, Kuro-bou? 」

At Saikyou's nonsensical words—

"Eh, well. It was something like that."

Ikki affirmed her analysis with a nod. He had employed his anti-personnel technique, Blade Steal, against Kirihara.

"R-Ridiculous! How can something like that happen!? Especially since I must have been invisible to you…!"

"I didn't see you, but knowing 'where Kirihara-kun is right now' isn't that difficult, because you've left a lot of clues, you know?"

"Clues…?"

"The wounds you've put on me. Your procedure from the sequence of wounds I took. Your direction from the angles. And the distance from the power. They all tell me where you are. Tracing the Hunter's position at any particular moment is easy if I follow these markers, and if I understand that much, it's the same as being able to see you. In that case, it's fine to do what I usually do. Whether it's sword technique or people, there's a principle that fundamentally governs all their actions. You can call it a system of values. By using that—the person's actions and plans, what that person is thinking right now, how I myself should move, what countermeasures should be taken, whether to move forward or draw back, to attack or defend—every possible action is completely and quite clearly predictable. For example, at this moment, I know that you've taken three steps back."

Kirihara's body froze in fright at Ikki's light declaration, and he leaked out a soundless shriek, because what Ikki had said was unmistakably true. But of course Ikki could know Kirihara's response. The principle he spoke of wasn't a notion limited to the here and now. That predictability of human thought was a firmly-rooted identity, not something that could be changed in an instant. However much the person himself wants to outsmart that identity, even the thought of outsmarting it arises from the identity itself, and therefore couldn't escape Ikki's perception. By stealing the opponent's identity, Ikki seized all those thoughts and feelings.

If Ikki had to name this technique, it would be *Perfect Vision*[10]. Before its power, Kirihara finally understood. The true dreadfulness of the knight called Ikki Kurogane wasn't sword technique, a one-minute boost, or anything else like that. It was his ability to expose and reflect the true nature of everything he sees, a discerning eye like a shining magic mirror. That mirror could capture even the invisible Hunter. Therefore—

"I see everything you're capable of doing. In this match, I'll take the win!"

With that declaration, Ikki burst forward to thrust a fang at the Hunter who had lost his refuge!

"S-Stay awaaaaay!!!"

In response, Kirihara put up one final resistance. Drawing *Oborotsuki* so forcefully that it creaked, he faced the sky above and shot one arrow that had all of his magic loaded into it. A moment later, the arrow exploded in midair, becoming a hundred slivers of iron shining with light invisible to the naked eye. Overtaking Ikki as a sudden shower, they homed and poured down on him, drilling into and smashing the stone floor of the battleground, heaving it up and smashing it again.

There was no pattern to the destruction. The Noble Art *Million Rain*[11] was an attack of indiscriminate scope made of more than a hundred pieces of iron. Kirihara had concluded that if his thoughts were being read, he should carpet-bomb the area without thinking. The idea had to be correct, but even so—

"Why!? Why doesn't it hit!?"

—Ikki cleared away the invisible arrowheads, running through the destructive rain without slowing the slightest and darting through the rolled-up cloud of dust. In truth, he had already seen all of it.

"It's useless, you know. No matter how much you try to keep your heart clear, you want to beat me. You want to kill me. The urge for that frightened heart to shout its killing intent can't be restrained. No matter how much you want to attack with an unreadable mind, the killing intent dwells inside you."

And Perfect Vision accurately captured that intent. Attacking an enemy without consciously aiming to kill was a mental state taught by certain martial arts, but it wasn't a skill that someone like Kirihara could use. He had only increased the number of arrows he had shot.

"Whether a hundred arrows or a thousand, my Ittou Shura won't fall to such things!"

Every resistance was already meaningless. Like a superior player who predicts a hundred moves ahead, Ikki had already seen the endgame!

"Wait, wait! Stop! Stop stop stop stop stop stop stop stop stop stop stop stop I said! Do you hear me!? Stop fucking kidding me! Am I supposed to fall to this F-Rank failure of a student!? Unlike you, people expect things of me! Unlike worthless garbage like you, I have things to lose, you know! Someone like you, there's no reason for you to win against me! So stoooooop!!!"

Ikki didn't stop. He already couldn't be stopped by Kirihara!

"H-Hey! This is a joke, right!? Yeah! Let's drop it! Let's drop it already! That kind of, that blade!? If you cut a person with that thing, it'll probably become a disaster, right!? That kind of thing isn't normal! There's other ways for us to do this! So let's stop! I-I know! Let's decide it with rock-paper-scissors! That's good, right!? Hey, Kurogane-kun! Aren't we classmates, friends!?"

Ikki wasn't going to listen. Who was it that asked if he had prepared himself in coming onto this stage? From the moment a knight entered the ring, he was resolved to kill or be killed. Therefore, Ikki would have no mercy. The black blade would clear away Kirihara's resistance, grasp Kirihara at sword distance at last, and—

"Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!"

"H-HIIIIIIIIIIIIIII! S-STOOOOOOOOOOOOP!!! I get it! I'm fine with losing! I'm fine with losing so DON'T HURT MEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!"

Ikki swung downward with a flash, and in that moment, the space Ikki sheared through shined bright. Kirihara's body was visible in the middle of that light, and he fell on his back onto the ground already unconscious, turning up the whites of his eyes, spouting foam from his mouth, but… without injury. He had been cut so shallowly he wasn't even bleeding from the skin on the tip of his nose.

Ikki understood that Kirihara was giving up, and had no intention of killing Kirihara from the beginning. And yet—

The predicted distance was off by a millimeter, huh.

—yet even though he hadn't intended to wound, the sword edge did slightly touch skin. It was only because the power of Kirihara's arrows made reading the distance difficult.

My training's still lacking, I guess? There's still a long way to go.

And seeing that the Hunter was defeated by the sword-wielding beast before him—

"Shizuya Kirihara can no longer fight! The winner, Ikki Kurogane!"

—the referee announced Ikki's first victory.

Part 13

「The match is oveeer! Somehow the F-Rank knight, Contender Ikki Kurogane, has taken the victory! Even though he was prohibited from attending classes last year, he has defeated his generation's strongest knight in a fight to the death, and acquired a splendid first win in these selection battle matches!」

The moment Ikki's victory was announced, the string holding him up snapped. Everything he'd been holding in with vigor alone—wounds and bleeding from the fight, extreme fatigue from Ittou Shura's backlash—poured out together.

「Congratulations…! Aaaaah! Contender Kurogane has fallen in the ring! Isn't it quite clumsy to collapse after winning!?」

「Aw crap. Medical team! Hurry up and stuff that guy in a capsule!」

Accepting Saikyou's instructions, the facility's staff put Ikki's body on a stretcher and carried him out. Because iPS capsules were installed in every training arena, the worst-case scenario would probably be avoided. And after the winner was removed this way, only the fainted Kirihara remained in the arena, until Kirihara too was dragged out by a staff member.

「Contender Kirihara has also left the ring just now. He was considered the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival's leading candidate for this year, but was unexpectedly defeated! Perhaps due to that huge shock, there's no sign he's getting up despite not receiving any injury!」

One member of Kirihara's cheering party, who had seen the fight's conclusion from the spectator seats, coughed.

"He was somewhat… uncool."

"The last part, wasn't he crying? 'Don't hurt me?'"

"I'm disillusioned, honestly…."

"Let's go back, go back. I've already kinda lost interest."

Tsukuyomi and Saikyou watched all this from their commentator seats.

「Uh-oh, the cheering girls are leaving in droves. Well, it must be hard to lose an idol.」

「Even if he was hurt, they'd have seen what he's really like sooner or later, you know.」

「…That's also true, huh? Ehh, then today's fourth match ends here. The fifth match will begin after the ring's cleaned up, so the contenders who will appear, please get ready.」

After making the announcement, Tsukuyomi cut her microphone.

"Whew… what an amazing match. Contender Kirihara's Area Invisible that got him so many wins without injury, being defeated by an F-Rank knight. I didn't see that coming."

Relaxing, she said so to the nearby Saikyou. But where Saikyou should've been sitting, there was only a note bearing a short message: 「That match was satisfying enough, so I'm outta here.」

"Noooooo! I don't want to do this anymooooore! Somebody switch with meeeee!"

Part 14

While Tsukiyomi screamed, the student spectators were also leaving the fourth training arena one by one since most of them came to watch this match. But two people stood in the middle of that flow without moving their feet.

"With so much of the audience walking out, I feel a little bad for the pair fighting in the next match."

Arisuin coughed while looking towards the movement of people, then asked the petite girl who was standing next to him.

"On the other hand… isn't Shizuku going to the hospital room?"

Shizuku shook her head slightly.

"…He'll just be sleeping even if I go."

"He might be sleeping, but in a girl's heart she wants to be nearby at a time like this, right? Stella-chan was running after him. …Maybe you're thinking of leaving the two of them alone?"

He asked the question carefully, but Shizuku's face swelled with the beginning of a sulk anyway. She bared her teeth in a huff.

"Today is… special. It looks like that girl got a victory."

Shizuku seemed exceedingly reluctant, but she was also happy. Nobody knew this, but because Stella had majestically declared in front of the masses a love for the will and feelings of Shizuku's brother who nobody comprehended, Shizuku resisted the desire to run after him immediately and hover nearby. She simply stood here, because at least for today, she didn't want to interfere with them.

"But it's really only for today."

"Hahaha. …Shizuku."

"What? You want to poke fun at me for losing?"

"Not at all. Don't you know? I very much like Shizuku the way she is."

Her pale cheeks turning red, Shizuku sulked more and more.

"Jeez! Please don't play with me like that!"

"Haha, I'm sorry. I won't touch this subject anymore, so won't you cheer up? Well then, what should we do? Since we're here, how about watching the next match?"

"…I'm not very interested."

"In that case, should we travel a little farther than usual and go eat something delicious, just the two of us? With Ikki injured like that, today's victory celebration will certainly be canceled."

Using a capsule would mend wounds immediately, but fatigue couldn't be improved so easily. Ikki would probably be in a coma for the rest of the day. And until he woke up, Stella definitely wouldn't leave his side.

"Since you're giving those two some time alone, you deserve a bit of luxury in return, don't you think?"

"…A place with tasty alcohol would be good. I'm already an adult, so."

"Gotcha. I know a place with good atmosphere you can look forward to."

"Despite what I said just now, I'll absolutely regret leaving that sow alone with my brother in a few hours, which means I'll have an extremely bad temper. Sorry, but you should be prepared for that."

"Hahaha. Don't worry, I'll be ready—♪"

Then while deciding whether they'd return to their room to change clothes, the two headed for the exit behind the flow of people. Watching the backs of the spectators who left first, Shizuku suddenly coughed.

"Those people who insulted Onii-sama some time ago, I wonder if they still refuse to believe that he's strong?"

"Who can say? There are probably some who don't accept reality even when they see it with their own eyes. But everyone who has the strength to try for the summit of the Seven Stars will surely recognize it, and remember the name Ikki Kurogane. So Ikki won't turn back into the ordinary Failed Knight that he seemed to be until now. Definitely not."

Arisuin's words were correct. Today was a turning point, when the Failed Knight took another name in a corner of the Net.

Crownless Sword King.

Such a name demonstrated that Ikki wouldn't remain just a Failed Knight, because Ikki Kurogane had taken down one of the Seven Stars Sword-Art Festival's leading representative candidates.

Part 15

"Well well, what an amazing sight today. An F-Rank Failed Knight overthrowing a Hunter who uses the strongest anti-personnel Noble Art, and with such an unconventional method? Seeing through the opponent's identity in the middle of the match is beyond human."

In the audience seats of the fourth training arena, a petite red figure ascended the stairway while her shoes made a clip-clopping sound. She was the one who fled after giving some match commentary, Nene Saikyou, and she was uttering a monologue about the match with passionate favor.

"Not even people in the A-class league could do something like that. No, no, he's just Kuu-chan's secret weapon. The selection battles will be enjoyable though~. But next time, I want him to duel with a stronger opponent. For example, yes… like this academy's student council president."

She arrived at the spectator seats' top floor.

"Don't you Hagun Academy student council officers agree?"

She turned a smile with hidden meaning at the four knights there. Those four had magic power of a quality obviously different from the students leaving the arena, and they all held individual nicknames.

The vice president, "Fifty Fifty" Utakata Misogi.
The treasurer, "Scharlach Frau"[12] Kanata Toutokubara.
The secretary, "Destroyer" Ikazuchi Saijou.
The general affairs manager, "Runner's High" Renren Tomaru.

They were Hagun Academy's most influential people.

"It's too bad that To~ka-chan isn't here, right? She wanted to see today's match, you know. My intuition says Kuro-bou will become To~ka-chan's rival in the selection battles."

At Saikyou's words, Utakata Misogi, an elementary student… no, a petite boy who might even be a kindergartener, burst into laughter.

"Ahaha—☆. Saikyou-sensei is being deliberately mean, isn't she?"

Kanata Toutokubara, the tall blonde girl wearing a pure white dress as if she was a French noblewoman and carrying a parasol even though it was indoors, smiled as she stood next to the smaller Utakata.

"Hmm. Yes, entirely. He fought onwards so gallantly after great injury, so it would be pitiable not to set him at an even higher value, wouldn't you say?"

"Heh. Aren't you both quite confident? Is the gap between regular students and the best four of last year's Sword-Art Festival really so wide?"

"Ahaha—☆. Saikyou-sensei really is deliberately mean. Even though she knows it."

"Hmm, surely so. It's true even without looking into things of the past, like records from previous years."

"What are you saying?"

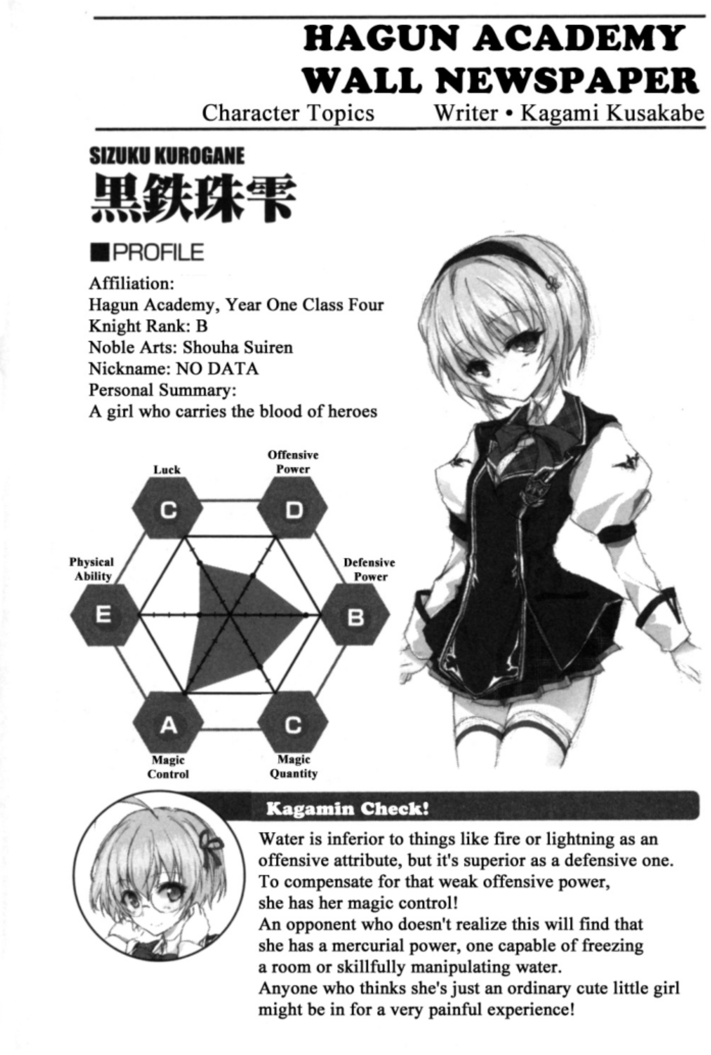
Toutokubara raised her face slightly, and narrowed her blue eyes like she was looking far away.

"It's quite simple. However sharp the claws, however sharp the fangs… why should a mouse win against a lion? She'd take no notice of that boy. Our princess is so far beyond him, he couldn't even see someone so high above."

References

1. ↑ *Hakuraijin,* 白雷刃: "White Lightning Blade"
2. ↑ *Suiroudan,* 水牢弾: "Water Prison Orb"
3. ↑ *Area Invisible*: This uses the kanji 狩人の森, *Kariudo no Mori* ("Hunter's Forest").
4. ↑ *Oborotsuki,* 朧月: "Misty Moon"
5. ↑ *Throwing down the spoon*: A Japanese proverb, meaning to admit defeat—literally, a doctor throwing down his medicine spoon because he can't treat an incurable patient.
6. ↑ *Yaksha*: A class of nature spirit found in Hindu, Jainism, and Buddhism. They have a dual personality: one inoffensive, one malicious.
7. ↑ Three trillion yen is approximately thirty billion United States dollars. In comparison, the 2012 London Olympic Games earned approximately three billion US dollars in broadcast revenue.
8. ↑ *Kiri-yan*: A contraction of "Kirihara-chan". Compared to using the suffix "-chan", which means "little" and is used to address children, referring to Kirihara with a cutesy "Kiri-yan" is treating him even more like a child.
9. ↑ *Kuro-bou*: A contraction of "Kurogane bouzu", where "bouzu" means "boy". Similar to Kiri-yan, this is a cutesy way to address a child.
10. ↑ *Perfect Vision*: This uses the kanji 完全掌握, "Kanzen Shouaku" ("Perfect Grasp").
11. ↑ *Million Rain*: This uses the kanji 驟雨烈光閃, "Shuu'u Rekkousen *("Downpour of Violent Light").*
12. ↑ *Scharlach Frau*: "Scarlet Woman", in German.

Epilogue: A Moonlit Vow



HAGUN ACADEMY WALL NEWSPAPER

Character Topics Writer • Kagami Kusakabe

SIZUKU KUROGANE

黒鉄珠雫

■PROFILE

Affiliation:
Hagun Academy, Year One Class Four
Knight Rank: B
Noble Arts: Shouha Suiren
Nickname: NO DATA
Personal Summary:
A girl who carries the blood of heroes

Kagamin Check!

Water is inferior to things like fire or lightning as an offensive attribute, but it's superior as a defensive one. To compensate for that weak offensive power, she has her magic control! An opponent who doesn't realize this will find that she has a mercurial power, one capable of freezing a room or skillfully manipulating water. Anyone who thinks she's just an ordinary cute little girl might be in for a very painful experience!

Ikki awoke in brightness that spread over his eyelids like a blur, and he opened those eyelids without a fight. An unfamiliar ceiling floated in dim light before his eyes.

'I'm in the infirmary?

That was exactly right. Ikki had collapsed after the match, and his physical trauma was immediately treated with a capsule. He was then brought into the infirmary and put in a sickbed. Lifting his head, Ikki looked up through a window. The full moon showed him he had slept for many hours since then.

It was because I was so showy, I guess.

But there was already no pain in his body, so his wounds were completely healed. Despite being violently knocked about, injuries of that degree wouldn't stick if a capsule was used to treat him. Still, languidness from fatigue would remain.

"…**snore**."

"Hmm?"

To his surprise, Ikki heard a familiar noise somewhere in the dimness. What was that? He raised his still-sluggish body.

"Stella…."

She was dozing in a chair beside the bed. In his recollection just before losing consciousness completely, he had been loaded onto a stretcher, and there was the figure of a girl who had called out as he was being carried away.

…*Was she with me the whole time after that?*

Thinking about it, Ikki felt a sweet pressure squeezing his chest.

"Ah."

When he looked closely, he saw a bit of drool hanging from Stella's lips as she dozed. Even a princess was defenseless while sleeping it seemed, but this probably wasn't something she'd want people to see. Ikki felt around his pocket, took out a handkerchief, and gently wiped off the hanging saliva while taking care not to disturb her. But—

"Nn…uu, …fuaa."

Was she sleeping too lightly? Stella opened her eyes the moment the handkerchief touched her lips.

"Sorry. I guess I woke you up?"

"Ikki…?"

Stella was dull from sleep and moved vacantly, but slowly her sight focused on the handkerchief wet from her own saliva. **Poof!** Her face went bright red and she snatched the handkerchief from Ikki's hand.

"Did you see something?"

Ikki winced at the question ferociously stabbing toward him.

"I-I didn't see anything."

"You're lying."

"…Yes. Sorry."

"Ooh—!"

He answered obediently, and Stella's face became more and more eggplant-purple, her mouth rasping back and forth.

"You're the worst! To wake up at a time like this! It's too embarrassing!"

"…It's really hard to answer that sort of criticism."

"Shut up, idiot! I'll buy another handkerchief to return later!"

"Eh? You don't need to. Don't worry about it."

"I have to worry about it, you know!"

"Ah, okay. Please forgive me."

Ikki had to withdraw when Stella growled and bared her fangs, but just as the conversation stalled, **rumble rumble**, a cute sound from Stella's stomach echoed in the silent infirmary.

"Nooooooo! What is this already!?"

"Stella, calm down. There might not be anyone else here, but this is still basically a hospital room."

"To be seen like this the moment you wake up, it would make you want to cry too! Everything is completely your fault! What is this, you!? Hearing me make hungry sounds like it's nothing! Idiot, idiot!"

Stella struck Ikki over and over with balled up fists. It hurt a little, but he couldn't complain to Stella who stayed at his side long enough to miss meals. Ikki bowed his head at Stella's reprimands.

"...I'm really sorry. I've only showed you uncool things, and made you worry."

"I haven't been worried at all! Those kinds of injuries are just like scratches after a nap in a capsule...!"

"But you were with me the whole time, right?"

Putting her gaze on the belly that some time ago raised a grumbling, Stella awkwardly turned her face away.

"It-It couldn't be helped, you know! Did you forget? I'm your slave, and it's natural for a servant to watch over her sick master. It's not something you'd thank me for!"

"No, I want to say it. If you hadn't been there today, it really would've been dangerous."

When he was almost about to yield, she shouted out that she loved someone so unskilled, and that was why Ikki didn't abandon his hopes while so many people were calling him worthless. Even in his bitterness, he recalled those words of love, and now Ikki had to convey something no matter what.

"Hey. Stella."

"I said I don't need gratitude—"

No. What he wanted to convey wasn't gratitude.

"Me too—I love you."

Facing the girl who said she loved the way he lived, Ikki spoke his honest feelings, and all expression fell from Stella's face at the sudden confession. Because it was too abrupt, she didn't understand at first, but understanding gradually filled her mind.

"Hyau…!"

Stella screamed, tumbled from the chair, and landed on her back.

"Wha, a-are you okay Stella!?"

"Id-, i-i-idiot! D-Do you know what you just said to me!?"

"Yeah, I know. I love you, Stella."

Whether or not Ikki had prepared himself beforehand, his words weren't bashful. But Stella, who wasn't expecting this kind of announcement, had her face blushing a red incomparable to the one not long ago, and was reduced to blubbering incoherence.

"L-Letting you say it, but, t-that!? My, that is, Ikki's way of life, his will, something like that, I said I love that, you know!? N-Not particularly you yourself, that… as a m-m-man, whether I love you, I wasn't talking about that, you know!? The main point is that I'm the princess of another country, and the affections of a commoner, that kind of thing, i-it's impossible!"

Ikki nodded.

"Yeah, I know that too. I'm a rootless person who can't even return to his own family, and you have your own circumstances, position, and so on. The words from my mouth can't become anything more. But today, I can't keep them inside either."

This sweetness, hiding it was too hard.

"If I don't tell you this now, I won't be able to later, so… I want you to know that meeting you made me truly happy. Of course, you don't have to answer."

He knew he'd be refused, but the bitterness from that was far better than not conveying his great gratitude, and that was why Ikki offered his feelings this way. But—

"…Sneaky."

He glanced at Stella who was puffing her cheeks.

"Sneaky?"

"…Only you being honest, it's sneaky."

Ikki didn't know what Stella meant. He simply had a hunch that Stella's ire was terribly piqued. As he thought, she was probably annoyed at hearing the confession of someone even lower than a commoner. She certainly looked peeved.

"Close your eyes for a bit."

She's going to hit me!?

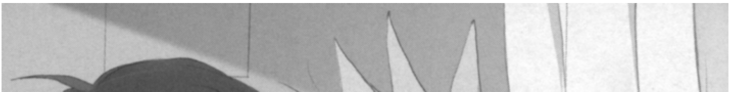
"Uh, umm, sorry Stella. If I made you uncomfortable—"

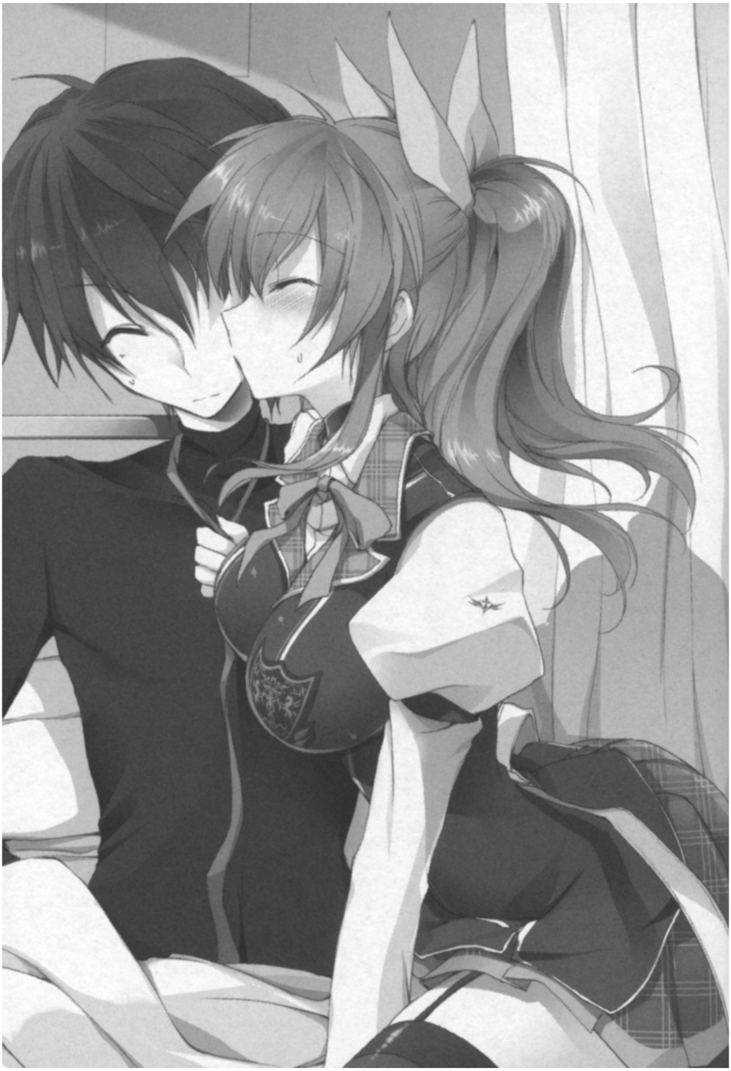
"I said close your eyes!"

"G-Got it!"

There were times Stella's voice exerted a serious, compelling force. Maybe it was a skill belonging to royalty? Ikki closed his eyes while making a nervous sound, and after a short silence—

smooch





—he felt a tender, moist sensation on his cheek.

Eh…?

Ikki opened his eyes in shock, and the girl he saw had her own cheeks dyed in bright apple red.

"S-Stella… just now…."

He didn't finish the question. Even as dull as he was, Ikki understood that Stella had kissed him. But because Ikki didn't expect Stella to do such a thing, he could only stare at her in dumbfounded silence. Stella's eyes grew wet at Ikki's reaction.

"D-Don't misunderstand. Just now, slave or master, princess or commoner… it wasn't about any of that. I did it because I wanted to do it. I-I'll tell you right now, even if you gave me an order, I'd absolutely not do something like this…."

"…In other words, you're saying it's okay?"

Stella hid her damp eyes at that question, while her cheeks bloomed further red from embarrassment. A small bit, a really small bit—but she definitely nodded.

"…B-But, you know? That… because I've never socialized with boys before, you might be really disillusioned."

"N-Not at all! Besides, I haven't done anything like socialize with girls either."

Ikki had never been in such a relationship before. His first kiss… well, it had been stolen by his younger sister the other day, but his experience with the opposite gender was equally nonexistent, and he admitted it honestly.

"Then I'm Ikki's first sweetheart?"

"Y-Yeah."

"Is that so? …Ehehe. Somehow, I'm glad…."

Stella narrowed her eyes in delight, and softened her cheeks. Ikki couldn't restrain himself upon seeing that.

"Sorry. Right now, you're a little too cute and I can't bear it."

"Eek!?"

Without waiting for Stella to finish her words, Ikki pulled her body towards himself, and held her tight.

"Thank you. I'm very happy."

"...Jeez. I'm only letting you be this pushy today, you know? If you're not gentle from now on, I'll bite you, okay?"

Sighing in astonishment, Stella also slowly put her hands around Ikki's back and accepted his embrace. Stella's body was warm, soft... but he felt a strong flame burning within. That heat was wonderfully sweet.

And... for that reason—

"Hey, Stella."

"...What is it?"

"Back then, you said that if you were with me you'd follow me wherever I go, right?"

"Yeah."

"Me too. If it's with you, I feel I can become strong enough to go anywhere."

So—

"So let's go together, the two of us, as high as knights can go."

And—

"And for the last match at that summit—I want to fight you."

Separating from Stella a little, Ikki declared this as he gazed into her eyes. Walking together, pushing each other forward, facing one another once more. At first, Stella's deep crimson pupils opened wide in astonishment, but a blaze gradually began to sway there, shining with strong fighting spirit.

"...I was hoping the same, you know. Because next time, I absolutely won't lose."

What Ikki desired, Stella also desired from the bottom of her heart. She loved him more than anyone else. She respected him more than anyone else. For these reasons, she wanted to fight this knight one more time. Like Ikki, she was someone who reached for the utmost heights. There was one summit, and she had no intention of yielding it. The two of them, in the middle of silence so strong it hurt the ears, vowed to the brightly glittering moon. From now on, they would probably have many fights with strong enemies they hadn't yet seen.

But to not lose to anyone—

And to meet their highest and most beloved rival at the battleground where the Seven Stars Sword King was crowned—

"It's a promise."

Afterword

For those who know me through *Rakudai Kishi no Eiyuutan*, this is our first meeting. For those who purchased *Danzai no Exceed*[1] and *Kanojo no Koi ga Hanashitekurenai!*[2], and are also reading the current work, it's great to see you again. Thank you very much for purchasing an installment of my new series, *A Chivalry of the Failed Knight*.

The premise of the current work is "superpowered battle sports".

As a matter of fact, I've wanted to try a story about a sport rising in the world ever since I won a prize with *Danzai no Exceed*[3], you know? Something that feels like Sekkou Awamura-sensei's *Mugen no Linkage*[4] in GA! Now that this volume's complete, I'm as pleased as can be! I hope all of you readers are satisfied too? If so, I'd be happy to continue presenting this story of a Failed Knight walking the road to knighthood.

In writing this work, I've once again collaborated with many people. I'll take this opportunity to acknowledge them and express my gratitude.

First, the fantastic Won-san, who created the illustrations for us. Oh dear, tearing the tights, oh dear, attaching a garter belt to the tights, I wanted to see not just the bra but the panties too, you knooow! I wanted to write the panties too, you knooow! Really, thank you very much for answering my fussy requests (about the Stella strip show illustration and everything else)!

And the supervisor Kobara-san, who I'm always, always obliged toward. Thank you very much for polishing my work this time too. The outline especially was due to Kobara-san, and I think it has the highest craftsmanship!

After that, the sales department that helped precisely identify our audience base very much saved us! You have my gratitude!

Lastly, to all of the readers of *Rakudai Kishi no Eiyuutan*, I offer my greatest thanks.

It's because of every one of you that I've published this work. Truly, thank you very much!

Well then, let's meet again in volume two!

References

1. ↑ *Danzai no Exceed*, 断罪のイクシード: Publisher link
2. ↑ *Kanojo no Koi ga Hanashitekurenai!*, 彼女の恋が放してくれない！: Publisher link
3. ↑ *Danzai no Exceed* won the 2nd annual GA Bunko award for excellence in 2010.
4. ↑ *Mugen no Linkage*, 無限のリンケージ: Publisher link